





*Last and First in Burma*  
(1941-1948)



by the same author

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THE MOTHERLY AND AUSPICIOUS  
WHITE OF MERGEN  
LORD OF THE THREE WORLDS

LAST AND FIRST  
IN BURMA  
(1941-1948)

*by*

MAURICE COLLIS

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Dedicated with Affection  
to  
BRIGADIER JOHN BOURKE  
formerly commander of  
2 Burma Brigade





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U Thant



## CHAPTER I

### *Introductory*

**T**his book relates how we lost Burma; and is also a relation of how the Burmese got it back. In May 1941 Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith became Governor there in succession to Sir Archibald Cochrane; in January 1948 Sir Hubert Rance, the then Governor, handed over to the Ministers of the Republic of Burma. These six and a half years were probably the most momentous in Burmese history. They saw the conquest of the country by the Japanese in 1942; the withdrawal of the British army and administration over the mountains to India; the defeat of the Japanese in 1945; and the rise of Aung San, the Burmese national leader, who achieved the liberation of his country.

Events of such magnitude drew many celebrated figures into Burma, a part of the world which hitherto had been thought of as much out of the way, and where little had happened since the British occupation of its capital, Mandalay, in 1885, and their deportation of its king, Thibaw. Among the personages who played important parts were Field Marshal Lord Wavell, Field Marshal Lord Alexander, Admiral Lord Mountbatten, the American General, Joseph Stilwell, and Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek. These actors fulfilled their roles and went, but a protagonist remained throughout on the stage, the Governor, Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith. The story groups itself naturally round him. As head of the administration he was intimately concerned with everything that happened from first to last. The history of these years is in some sort his biography.

The materials for writing the present book have been provided in the first place by Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith himself.

## *Introductory*

His papers consist of official records of his administration; letters to the two Secretaries of State for Burma under whom he served; a number of his memoranda, speeches, notes and the like; together with recollections, both on paper and verbal, which he has confided to me. Besides these materials, I have been able to dispose of papers belonging to those who served under him, such as his secretaries and his A.D.C.s and the officials of his government. On the military side I have relied on the published despatches and have been fortunate in receiving in addition valuable aid from officers who were in command during the campaigns or are now engaged in the study of them. This help has enabled me to advance with some assurance a sketch of the invasion which is an integral part of the first scene in the drama. The re-invasion, under the direction of Lord Mountbatten, is not treated in the same military detail, since it did not bear on the civil administration so directly, though where it has to do with the Burmese Resistance I have been more full. In this part I have received advice from Lord Mountbatten and from members of his staff. As far as possible, the sources of my statements are noted as I proceed. They will be seen to include certain Burmese sources.

Before Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith was appointed Governor of Burma in 1941, he had made a name for himself in this country as an agriculturist. Indeed, his career had been quite meteoric. Born in Ireland in 1899, a member of a well-known family in the County Cavan, he served for a year or so with the Indian Army, and was invalided out at the age of twenty-one. During the next years he made agriculture his special study and at the age of thirty-two was Vice-President of the Farmers' Union. In 1935 he stood for Parliament and was returned for Petersfield in the Conservative interest. The following year he became President of the Farmers' Union, and the year after was knighted for his services to agriculture. Representing as he did the farmers in Parliament, it was not unnatural for Mr Chamberlain to think of him as Minister of Agriculture and he was appointed to that office in January 1939. He was then only in his fortieth year. During his tenure of the office till the fall of the Chamberlain government in May 1940, he was responsible for measures of national importance.



## *Introductory*

Before war was declared in September 1939 he had secured a subsidy which enabled farmers to plough a million and a half acres of pasture, and by his laying up of a reserve of three thousand Ford tractors, where there had been none before, it was possible to put British agriculture on a war footing immediately after the outbreak of hostilities, a measure which substantially increased our meagre food supplies. After the fall of the Ministry he held a staff appointment with the rank of Colonel in the Home Defence Executive, and in the early months of 1941 was selected by the War Cabinet for the governorship of Burma. This appointment was quite unexpected both by himself and everyone else. Apart from his military service as a very young man in India, he had no connection with the East and never thought he might return there. Before Sir Archibald Cochrane's time, the Governors of Burma had been drawn from the Indian Civil Service. With the separation of Burma from India under the 1935 Act, the appointment became a political one. The previous Governors had all been men of mature years. It was a new experience for the Burmese to have a Governor aged forty-two. It was also a new experience for them to have somebody of Sir Reginald's character. He was quite lacking in self-importance. He trusted more to personal touch than to paper. His inclination was always to offer his friendship; and he had the gift of attracting it in return. There was nothing of the pro-Consul about him. The Burmese had been promised self-government at some future date; he was in favour of the date being as soon as possible. From the start his sympathies were entirely with them and his chief ambition was to win their confidence. Informal, guided much by intuition, warm hearted and high spirited, he was the right man to send to Burma at a time when England, fighting for her life, could only hope that her satellites would not turn against her. In April 1941, he, his wife and two daughters, set sail, going from the centre of the World War to what was believed to be its periphery, for at that time it was, on the whole, thought unlikely that Japan would attack and, if she did, that she could harm Burma.

## CHAPTER II

### *Japanese Intentions*

THE great riddle of the moment was whether Japan would declare war. There were many indications that she might do so: her military party was in the saddle; her ambition to dominate Asia was of long standing; the Dutch and British possessions in the Far East were very lightly held and could not be reinforced. Against the view that the present was Japan's great opportunity, were the facts that she was apparently bogged in China; that her armies were at an immense distance from Burma or Malaya; that the fortress of Singapore would have first to be reduced. She would be obliged to undertake a military and naval expedition on a large scale. The fortress was considered strong enough to resist such an assault. Moreover, an expedition by sea would expose a long flank. The Americans were holding out of the war but a Japanese attack in the Pacific would surely bring them in, particularly when a flank was presented which would invite a decisive counter-stroke. An attack by land was considered out of the question.

Before leaving for the East, Dorman-Smith had asked the opinion of British Intelligence. The view given was emphatically against the probability of a Japanese attack; they would never risk bringing America in. It was pointed out, moreover, that even if they succeeded in taking Singapore, Burma, protected on its eastern side by difficult mountains and forests, could hardly be invaded.

Churchill's opinion was more cautious, as appears in his *The Second World War*. He always had nagging at the back of his mind the possibility of a Japanese attack, an apprehension which

## *Japanese Intentions*

sometimes waxed and sometimes waned. His view, however, was that if a Japanese attack brought the Americans in, it would in the long run be a most fortunate event. If it did not do so, or if there was a time lag between American intervention and the Japanese attack, large areas of Britain's eastern possessions would have to be forfeited, at least for a while, in order that Britain herself might survive. It was impossible to reinforce Burma without endangering England. There were not the troops, munitions, guns and planes to spare. But though he was prepared for forfeits, on the whole at this time he did not think it likely that Japan would be so rash as to attack. Anyhow, Burma would have to make do with what she had—about one division.

With these views prevailing in high places, Dorman-Smith found on arrival in Burma little feeling of urgency or alarm. He had no directive from the Cabinet to prepare the country for an invasion, nor representations from the military in that sense.

Nevertheless, reacting against the general complacency, he strove to take what precautionary measures were possible. Though it was evident that only troops, guns, planes, munitions, could safeguard Burma and that he had no power to supply them, he could at least help to mitigate for the population what, if it should happen, would be a catastrophe. There was civil defence, for instance. As Rangoon at the moment was far outside the range of any possible attack by Japanese aircraft, only the most elementary precautions had been taken. There were no air raid shelters, no adequate fire-fighting appliances, and only a few half-trained wardens. But if war came, Rangoon would be the first target. Everything was centred there. Besides being the seat of the government, it was the only port in the country where supplies and reinforcements could be landed. Nearby was the great oil refinery of Syriam, the destruction of which would be a vital blow. Accordingly, he asked Whitehall to send out a civil defence expert at once. Mr de Graaf Hunter arrived in August and immediately began the herculean task of providing at short notice a city of nearly half a million inhabitants with protection from blast and fire.

Burma, however, was so completely unprepared for war that

## *Japanese Intentions*

it was impossible to do more than tinker with the countless problems which presented themselves. Among many other grave deficiencies, there was no road or rail to the west. The mountains and forests along the western frontier were crossed by tracks but there was no means of driving a motor vehicle out of the country. You had to walk out, and the walk was about two hundred and fifty miles through uninhabited country of the roughest sort. Before Dorman-Smith left England, this matter of a road to India had been mentioned to him by his neighbour, General Sir John Coleridge of Petersfield, who had served in those parts. 'The first thing you ought to do is to demand an India-Burma road,' the General told him. Dorman-Smith had mentioned this to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, who had to reply that as the Chiefs of Staff did not consider Burma to be immediately threatened, it was hardly likely that the supplies and machinery for such a great undertaking could be made available in the face of competing claims. The strategic conception, moreover, did not allow for it, as the Burma command was not under the C.-in-C. India, General Auchinleck, but under the C.-in-C. Singapore, Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham. Burma was conceived of as a base area for Singapore, not as the bastion of India. The line of airfields which followed the coast from Calcutta to Singapore, via Rangoon, and which supplied the fortress with its aircraft reinforcements, was considered far more important than an India-Burma road. It was on their extension that the Public Works Department, understaffed and poorly supplied with tools and materials, had been ordered to concentrate. As we shall see, the road became more necessary than any other work, but this was not appreciated until the last moment, when it was too late to do much.

But if Burma were to be put in any sort of a posture of defence, the first essential was to come to a political understanding with the Burmese Ministers, without whose co-operation little could be done.

## CHAPTER III

### *The Burmese Background*

THE attitude of the Burmese to the war in general and to the possibility of a Japanese invasion was determined by the fact that they conceived of their country as already occupied by foreigners. After its conquest in 1885, the British turned Burma into a province of India. An administration was set up which was staffed by the Indian Civil Service; the Governor, or, as he was then called, the Chief Commissioner, ruled as the Viceroy of India's lieutenant. The Burmese themselves were not represented in the government. They were, however, as soon as they could be trained, enlisted in the lower grades of the administration. After some years the Chief Commissioner was provided with a nominated council of Burmese residents, but it was not until thirty-eight years later, in 1923, that a start towards representative government was made. The Crown had from time to time declared its intention of granting full self-government. The date when the grant would be made had not been stated and nobody knew when it would be. Twelve years after the first step, a further step was taken. Under an Act passed in 1935 Burma was given a constitution which separated her from India and set up two Houses and a Council of Ministers responsible to them. But the Governor, not the Ministers, was in charge of defence, foreign affairs and currency. The Ministers, moreover, had no powers of dismissal over the European bureaucracy, and no say in the administration of the hill territories, forty per cent of the country's total area. Though the constitution of 1935 was advanced for that date (indeed, no other possession of the Crown, except the Dominions, had so much control over its affairs) it fell very short of complete

## *The Burmese Background*

sovereignty. The Burmese did not control their destiny. They had to go along with the Empire. Thus, on the outbreak of war with Germany, Burma became automatically at war. The Act did not require the Burmese Parliament's sanction; an unpleasant reminder of its limited power. Even a matter so vitally affecting the nation's life could not be discussed because the 1935 Act had reserved it to the Governor.

When Dorman-Smith arrived in Burma, U Saw was Premier, the third Premier since the inauguration of the 1935 constitution in 1937. The first Premier had been U Ba Maw, a picturesque but volatile personality who lost the confidence of the legislature in March 1939. He was succeeded by U Pu, a solid, religious, loyal man. When the legislature was informed that Burma was at war with Germany, U Pu got up in the House and said that his countrymen should support Britain and not seek to take advantage of her difficulties, since she was fighting for right and against tyranny, a plea not without nobility considering that Britain had been in occupation of Burma for fifty-three years. In March 1940, however, on a motion by the Minister U Ba Thi, the House passed a resolution that its support should be conditional on a promise of dominion status at an early date. Burmese sentiment was solidly behind the resolution and the fact that U Pu did not identify himself with it heartily enough alienated his supporters and contributed to his fall in September 1940.

U Saw, who succeeded that month to the Premiership, was a very different man from the quiet, respectable, old fashioned U Pu. He was a demagogue of mediocre education, ambitious for himself and without scruples, though he was a decided personality and had great influence. Some five years earlier he had visited Japan and was said on his return to be taking Japanese pay. He controlled a leading newspaper and had a body of youthful adherents known as the Galon Army which he used to overawe his political opponents and to keep himself in power. He believed that he was destined to achieve for Burma the full freedom so long desired, and his plan on coming into power was to give active effect to the U Ba Thi resolution, and trade Burmese co-operation for a promise of independence immediately after the

## *The Burmese Background*

war. This course he considered moderate and statesmanlike, in comparison with the demands of the more extreme nationalists, known as the Thakins, who advocated a popular rising to force Britain in her weakness to grant independence at once. The Thakin party had only three representatives in the Legislature. Though so small a minority, they had far more influence than appeared on the surface, and were a revolutionary underground, a Resistance. In 1940 many of their leaders had been arrested under the Defence of Burma Rules for subversive activities, such as strikes and agrarian agitation, and detained in gaol. The youth of Burma was behind them and they were destined to emerge as the most powerful party in the state. Their organisation was better than that of any other party. Even at this early stage they aspired to found a sovereign Burmese state.

These people were U Saw's rivals. He believed, however, that he would be able to maintain himself in power against this extreme left if he could obtain a promise of early dominion status.

Dorman-Smith was thus faced with the problem of how to arrive at a *modus vivendi* with U Saw. Disreputable and unreliable though he obviously was, it was essential to win his co-operation. His terms, however, could only be accepted by His Majesty's Government, which was not likely to do so in the middle of a war. In that case a working arrangement might not be attainable if he held out for the guarantee. With the Burmese Parliament in opposition it would be almost impossible to carry out measures for the defence of the country. U Saw, moreover, if he had been in the pay of the Japanese might now be in secret communication with them. If the Burmese Ministers opened the door for a Japanese invasion, the military position would be precarious. The lives of all European civil officers would be in great danger should the Burmese choose the moment of an invasion to rise in revolt. U Saw's terms, however, were not unreasonable. Dorman-Smith himself was by no means unsympathetic. He could at least suggest to the Secretary of State that it would be good policy to satisfy U Saw. The first thing, however, was to have a talk with him.

## *The Burmese Background*

By good fortune when the two met they took to each other. Dorman-Smith found something attractive in U Saw's rascality. The Premier's vision of himself as the leader destined to win the Burmese their liberation was rather moving, even if it was certain that he would fill his own pockets in the process. Though crafty and violent, he had a curious charm; he was amusing, manly, warm and human. Dorman-Smith found he could get on with him. On U Saw's side, the Governor seemed so easy and natural that he had to like him.

The ice being broken in this way, Dorman-Smith took U Saw and the Council of Ministers into his confidence. He told them that he would seek to induce the British Cabinet to agree to the guarantee. Meanwhile they should face the danger which it was his belief threatened their country, despite the scepticism in military circles. A Japanese invasion was not certain, but it was not unlikely, and it was their duty to help him to provide against it. Defence was, no doubt, his responsibility under the 1935 Act, but would they consent to share his responsibility? If so, he would bring them into the Defence Council, a body consisting hitherto of his official Counsellors and the army chiefs and whose deliberations were not circulated to the Council of Ministers.<sup>1</sup> Would U Saw accept the Deputy Chairmanship? And he would give the Defence Council a Burmese secretary.<sup>2</sup> Military matters would be freely discussed. He was prepared to trust them, if they would trust him. U Saw could not resist such an approach.

<sup>1</sup>When they attended the Defence Council, it was only to be asked to supply departmental funds and labour for military projects.

<sup>2</sup>U Tin Tut was appointed. He was the most brilliant Burmese member of the I.C.S. and was destined to play an influential part in subsequent events.



## CHAPTER IV

### *U Saw*

**T**he Ministers were greatly pleased at being brought onto the Defence Council, though of course the constitutional position remained unaltered and their position was no more than advisory. It gave them a *de facto* taste of what they were striving to obtain *de jure*. For the first time they were associated with high policy and had the satisfaction of knowing what was going on behind the scenes. The result was that when demands were made on the departments they controlled, they responded by expediting what hitherto their inclination had been to delay. As he got to know them better, Dorman-Smith sought to associate them yet more closely with his activities. He took three extensive tours through the country at this time and invited one or other of them to accompany him. This was a completely new departure; no Governor before had ever toured with Ministers in attendance. A happy atmosphere was the result, which accorded both with sound policy and his personal inclinations. The Ministers told him what otherwise he would never have heard and he was able to say to them what he could not have said, had he been on more formal terms. He used to invite them to drop in at Government House. U Saw often came. One evening, just as he was leaving, Dorman-Smith<sup>1</sup> said to him: 'By the way, the rumour is that you are charging 10,000 rupees for an appointment in Mandalay.' U Saw put on a show of indignation. 'Your Excellency, you suggest I'm selling jobs!' 'No, but I gather you are charging 10,000 for this one.' 'I am not,' said U Saw, with the ghost of a

<sup>1</sup>This conversation and the others in this chapter were reported to me by Sir Reginald himself.

smile. 'How much, then, are you charging?' U Saw's face relaxed into a grin. '15,000, but I'll stop it.'

In his continued efforts to break down the barrier which hitherto had existed between the Governor and the Burmese, Dorman-Smith invited the Ministers to his daughter's wedding, which took place in Maymyo, the hill station, about this time. That such an invitation was unheard of is proof of how extraordinarily old-fashioned and colonial was still British society in Burma. After the service in the church there occurred a yet stranger departure from precedent. *Ponnas* from Mandalay, descendants of the Court astrologers of the Burmese Kings, stood in a decorated pavilion on the lawn of Government House and recited a Buddhist service in Pali, as was customary at Burmese weddings. No previous Governor had even recognised the existence of this curious relic of the old Court. The Burmese public was pleased, the *Ponnas* delighted. In an address afterwards they humbly thanked His Excellency for the privilege of being allowed to bless his daughter. But British residents found it very difficult to adjust their minds to such an innovation.

U Saw gradually became an enthusiastic supporter of his Governor's efforts to improve the defences. He no longer seemed to think of the Japanese as potential deliverers. He would say: 'They're cruel chaps. Look at the way they've been behaving in China. I was a young man when I went to Japan. It was only natural for me to admire them. Many English there admired them enormously. And for me there was the extra reason that they were Asiatics. We Asiatics have had a poor time since Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape! It was nice to see an Asiatic race able to stand up to you all at last. But afterwards with their invasion of China and the terrible miseries they inflicted on the people, I grew to hate them.'

Nevertheless he would go off and among his own crowd make out ('I have to do it,' he would tell Dorman-Smith) that unless he got the promise of independence ('and we can't wait for it much longer') he'd put the screw on and teach His Excellency a thing or two.

There were times when he used to reproach Dorman-Smith for

## *U Saw*

not going fast enough. 'You are not getting the Burmese to back you as much as they would. Why don't you raise some real Burmese regiments? The Burma Rifles, they're all hill people, Chins, Kachins and Karens. How do you think we like having no place in our national army? You try. Burmese recruits will come forward. They fought for you in the last war in Mesopotamia and Palestine, when it was hard for them to tell what it was all about. But this time, in their own country, it will be clear enough.'

It was extremely late in the day to start recruiting Burmese. The military were not in favour of it, because after the First World War, the Burmese, bored with soldiering in the Indian Army where they were handled in such a way as to hurt their national pride, had become difficult to manage and ceased to be recruited, their place being taken by the hill people. However, as the troops in Burma were much in need of reinforcement and there seemed but a poor prospect of that from elsewhere, the decision was taken to raise further battalions of Burma Rifles and recruit Burmese for them. But as neither instructors nor arms were available, very little could be done.

About then Dorman-Smith suggested to U Saw that they should make a joint inspection of a Burma Rifles battalion. This was a proposition which had never been made to any Burmese politician. U Saw was delighted. When the time came and he stepped onto the parade with the Governor and together they received the present arms and walked up the lines, he was radiant with importance. Dorman-Smith was surprised how such a little thing could mean so much.

Soon afterwards an occasion arose when U Saw showed what he was ready to do in return. The R.A.F. in Burma was ridiculously weak. It had no bombers and consisted only of a squadron of Buffalo fighters, old machines whose place in Britain had been taken by Hurricanes. Besides the R.A.F., however, there was an American force, whose machines were Tomahawks, at that period a fighter of the first class. This American force had nothing to do with the defence of Burma. It was a mercenary formation—its proper name was the American Volunteer Group—and had been

## *U Saw*

hired by Chiang Kai-Shek, the Generalissimo of China, to assist him against the Japanese fighting in his country. Part of it was in Rangoon and part in China. The part in Rangoon was there because America was supplying China with aircraft via the Burma Road, which ran from Rangoon to the Northern Shan States and thence over the border to Chung-king, Chiang Kai-Shek's capital. At first, the machines used to be landed in their parts at Rangoon and sent unassembled to China by lorry. Later they were assembled at the Rangoon airfield and flown to China, though their armament continued to go by road. One day the Group's commander, Major General Chennault, called to see Dorman-Smith. He said the time had come when he thought it expedient to press for permission to arm his machines before they set out for China. Since to have armed American machines in Burma, able to supplement the meagre British squadron in an emergency, could only be an advantage, Mr Amery, the Secretary of State, was asked for sanction. The answer came from Air Marshal Brooke-Popham, the C.-in-C. at Singapore, and was a refusal, for the reason that to arm the machines in Burma might annoy Japan, a thing to avoid at a time when to fight her would be so awkward. Dorman-Smith, convinced that Japan would declare war at her chosen moment whatever the British did, determined to circumvent this order if he could. He got hold of U Saw and put the matter to him.

'You have no objection to the Americans arming their machines here?'

'On the contrary, it would be a splendid reinforcement.'

'But the C.-in-C. has refused permission.'

'Leave it to me,' said U Saw. 'I can fix it.'

'How?'

'There is an aerodrome up country at Magwe. It is a civil aerodrome and so under the Council of Ministers. Your Excellency has no control over it whatsoever. Tell General Chennault he can have the airfield.'

'But will the other Ministers agree?'

'Don't bother about them. I agree. If they fuss, I'll take the responsibility.'

Chennault got the airfield. Not only did he arm his Tomahawks there before sending them on, but he kept a nucleus of about forty for training his crews. When Japan attacked he was there. Without him, Rangoon, with but twelve Buffaloes to protect it, would have been blotted out.

The five year term of the Burmese Parliament was approaching its end. As the General Election drew nearer, U Saw began to enlarge on the difficulties it might create. It would be impossible, he told Dorman-Smith, for any party to go to the country on a co-operation programme. Everyone who wanted to get in would have to be anti-British and anti-war.

'Let me put it this way to Your Excellency,' he went on. 'The obvious line for my political opponents will be to tell the electorate that I am a traitor to the national cause for having co-operated with you before getting the promise of freedom. As the electoral campaign warms up, their speeches will get more and more fiery. They will fling all sorts of abuse at the British Government, accusing it of lies, deceptions, oppressions, anything that comes into their heads. This will lead to disturbances. To maintain order I shall be obliged to arrest them. Now, sir, to arrest one's political opponents may be all right in some states, but under our democratic constitution it would not be nice. Nor is that all. For to get votes I should be obliged to outbid my opponents in abuse of the British. Your Excellency would have no option but to arrest me. An election likely to land the politicians of all parties in gaol instead of in parliament is not going to be much help.'

'What do you advise, then, Premier?'

'I suggest that Your Excellency takes over the responsibility for law and order during the election. If my opponents overstep the law in their speeches, it will be for you to arrest them. In that way, I should escape the odium of having to do so, and, my rivals being removed, I would be able to get my votes without resorting to seditious language.'

This ingenious plan made Dorman-Smith smile. 'I am afraid that would not do,' he said. 'But there is another solution. I have the power to postpone the election after reference to Whitehall.'

To this proposal U Saw agreed at once. It gave him a new lease of office. 'You can count on my continuing to co-operate, as much as I dare if I am to keep my place,' he said.

• With this obstacle removed, Dorman-Smith was able to get on with what had to be done. The organisation of Rangoon's civil defence under Mr de Graaf Hunter has already been mentioned. Closely connected was another problem of the first magnitude. The population of Rangoon was something over 400,000. Of this figure 200,000 were Indians, some of them permanent residents but the most part casual labourers who had come without their families to make a little money and return. The dock workers and the conservancy coolies were nearly all Indian. These people were not thought likely to stay if Rangoon were bombed. Indeed, only a small minority of Indians, men with families, houses or other property and who knew the country well, would remain. The rest would leave, if possible, for India. They would see no point in risking their lives for the shilling a day they normally earned. Shipping would be able to transport only a fraction of them to Calcutta or Madras. The rest would have to walk. But there were no roads to India, only tracks over uninhabited mountains. About a million Indians altogether lived in Burma. If even half of this host joined in the flight and tried to cross the mountains, supplying them would be a colossal task during the month or more which the journey would take. At this early date it was impossible to tell in advance exactly what the Indians would do. What had happened with refugees in France the previous year was little guide. But a gigantic refugee problem certainly loomed on the horizon with all sorts of grave complications. For instance, if Indian labour deserted Rangoon, the port would cease to function. That would be a military disaster. In the hope of halting refugees in the neighbourhood of the city it was decided, as a first step, to build three camps outside the northern suburbs and install a water supply, food reserves and some rough sanitation. A lot of money was required and to get the Council of Ministers to find it was not easy because they did not immediately see why they should pander to panic. Let the Indians stay. They would be as safe as anyone else. It was true

there was some anti-Indian feeling, and not without reason. The Indians were foreigners of alien faiths; too many of them had been allowed to enter the country; they had undercut Burmese labour; they had too large a share of the retail trade; on the higher levels they had wormed their way into coveted jobs in the public services; their money-lenders, the Chettyar firms, had advanced cash to Burmese landowners and foreclosed to such an extent that the greater part of the rice land was now their property. 'Why should we have to spend so much on Indians,' U Saw would complain, 'when the money is urgently required for ourselves? You British always think of yourselves first. Well, it's human nature. Then why blame the Burmese?' However, Dorman-Smith was able to get round him. Something must be done to provide against a general stampede of a million Indians, or at least to control it. U Saw gave in, but the more the problem was examined, the more impossible appeared a complete solution. How were you to provide for the passage of hordes of terrified men, women and children over the lonely mountains of the Burma-India divide? But we shall be returning to this subject.

It would be tedious to describe the other precautionary measures now hastily initiated. All the British were doing military training for which they had volunteered after the fall of France. (There was, of course, no conscription in Burma.) In order to co-ordinate rail, river and road transport, an expert was asked for, but Whitehall was unable to supply one, and a member of the Civil Service had to be called in to act as Controller of Transport. Propaganda and price control received attention. A liaison officer for Rangoon was appointed with powers to issue emergency orders without reference to the Municipality in the event of an air raid.

By the end of August U Saw began to show signs of impatience. No word had been received from Whitehall. He had co-operated but the Cabinet had not given the promise he wanted. Dorman-Smith has described to me how U Saw continually pressed him over this matter and would say: 'Look at what we have helped you to get done. No matter how much you asked,

the Ministry never obstructed. Or if it made a few difficulties, they were only for show, just to keep the people quiet. But I'm not sure if I can go on like this. I'm ruining myself, I may have to resign. Don't you think I deserve a little present?'

'A little present' was U Saw's phrase for the promise of freedom.

Dorman-Smith, when addressing the Secretary of State, Mr Amery, to urge that the promise be given, had pointed out how much it would ease his task in Burma. There seemed no reason why it should not be given. British Governments had for years been declaring that a grant of dominion status was their ultimate aim. Since the grant was certainly coming, and would probably come soon after the war, why not fix an approximate time now? But the answer he got was that His Majesty's Government did not see their way at present to make such a pronouncement. He told U Saw frankly of his lack of success and tried to comfort him by saying: 'Though they have refused now in the stress of war, you'll find them much more amenable later, especially if you stand by us as you have been doing. Have patience a little longer. Your freedom is truly just round the corner.'

'There have been so many corners,' sighed U Saw, remembering how often this very phrase had been used during the preceding years.

The weeks passed and in September U Saw, complaining of the ever-increasing delicacy of his position, again asked for his little present. It now occurred to Dorman-Smith what a relief it would be if U Saw went to London and pressed his suit there. When Mr Amery and Mr Churchill had him facing them over a table they could explain their objections to granting his request. Or they might be convinced by his arguments and grant it. He represented the matter and U Saw was invited. The reason for the invitation was not, however, explicitly stated. U Saw urged that the reason be given and his visit described as being 'with a view to declaring full self government for Burma after victory'. Dorman-Smith advised the Cabinet to agree. But Churchill refused; he was willing to have a talk with U Saw, but he would not commit himself in the terms proposed. After some hesitation, U Saw decided to go. It was arranged that he should take with





1. Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith at his desk in Rangoon



*Keystone Press photograph*

2a. The Mandalay Astrologers



*Crown Copyright photograph*

2b. Burmese girl planting rice

him as secretary the U Tin Tut who, as already mentioned, was the Secretary of the Defence Council.

Before setting out on what he felt was a momentous journey, U Saw went to pay his respects at the Shwedagon Pagoda, whose golden spire dominates the city of Rangoon. He did not, however, go up one of the four great stairways barefoot and kneel before a shrine on the platform, but got into his private plane—an aged Moth piloted by an Anglo-Indian—and flew round and round and over the jewelled umbrella, as the *finial* is called, making his vows and supplications as he did so. This novel exhibition of piety was not entirely to the public taste. In Buddhist opinion it is held disrespectful to mount above a sacred object and so to have it beneath the feet. The Shwedagon, sacred in itself, contained innumerable images of the Buddha. U Saw should have been looking up respectfully at these, instead of looking down, as if he were superior to them. The flight was also taken by many Burmese as a proof of megalomania and was considered as undesirably eccentric as would have been in England a flight by Mr Churchill round the dome of St Paul's to ask God for a blessing. But it was highly characteristic of U Saw.

The night before his departure, Dorman-Smith gave him a farewell dinner. U Saw had not been to Europe before, and setting off now to visit it, when its inhabitants were locked in desperate combat, was no adventure for a timid man. The Mediterranean was ablaze and the shores of North Africa. The approaches to England were beset with perils. He who had never been on a long flight was flying thousands of miles into the heart of the western battle. His mission was not hopeless, but nor was it hopeful, and thinking of the dangers of the flight and of the small chance he had of getting from Churchill the promise he desired, he turned to Lady Dorman-Smith, on whose right he was sitting, and said: 'You know, I'm really a brave man to be going.' 'Indeed you are,' said she, 'and all of us think so.' Her reply seemed to put him in spirits and the dinner went well. But as the time approached for him to say goodbye, his mood changed and he said wistfully to Dorman-Smith: 'There's a chance surely of my persuading Churchill?'

## U Saw

'You know as well as I do there's little chance.'

'Yet I must go,' said U Saw. 'It is the only way I can hold my following.'

• 'And if you return unsuccessful?'

'I shall have to resign.'

'And then?'

'Oh, then, rouse the country,' said U Saw bitterly. 'Warn it to hope for nothing from Britain.'

'That would be a sad end to our work together. Would you force me to arrest you?'

'I trust not, Your Excellency. Churchill may yet grant my request. But if I fail, then indeed it may be that you will have to lock me up. I've been in prison before, so I'll know my way about. But if you have to, do not let it spoil our friendship. I'll be just as ready to help you as before. So if ever you should want my help in any matter, send your car to the gaol for me after dark and I'll come up and give you the best advice I can. For nothing must stop us from remaining friends.'

Dorman-Smith, as he might well be, was moved by these words from U Saw's heart. He wished him goodbye, a safe journey and return. He was not to see him again for four years.

We must leave Burma a moment to follow U Saw and U Tin Tut, hardly compatible as companions, the one a flamboyant politician, the other essentially a civil servant, though as a Burmese, he ardently desired to see his country independent. As the Premier's secretary his position was delicate. U Saw was not the Premier of an independent country. In a wide view he was not a Premier at all, but a man set up through British agency to manage in the British interest the internal affairs of Burma. For U Saw to deviate from his allegiance to Britain was for him immediately to be called a traitor. U Tin Tut, as a member of the Indian Civil Service, owed obedience to U Saw only in so far as he conducted himself in accordance with the Burma Act of 1935. The Act had created a dual authority, the one for internal, the other for external, affairs. U Tin Tut, in having to serve U Saw for the first and the British Government for the second, was in a sense as much U Saw's keeper as his secretary.

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So these two set off by plane—it was now early October 1941—to meet the truly extraordinary personage who sat in the centre of a vast web of affairs; who every hour of the day was engaged in public business of the utmost urgency for all the world; whose decisions no one in the world could be indifferent to, for they touched him either for good or ill; and who in the midst of turmoil, confusion, defeats, disappointments, surprises, threats, remained guided by one principle, that no matter deserved attention unless it helped England to survive. To this towering figure there journeyed U Saw to ask for a little present.

He arrived in London on 10 October. Amery received him warmly. The officials of the Burma Office entertained him and took him sightseeing. He was shown factories, docks, troops, hospitals, schools, anything he fancied. In a letter to Dorman-Smith, dated 23 October, Amery says: 'U Saw is down at Dover today and tomorrow I take the chair for him at a Government lunch. Next week there is a small lunch by the Lord Mayor and I am giving him lunch at my own house. On 18 October he was invited to lunch at Chequers and had a talk of over two hours with Churchill. He did not get very much change.' In a note made by Churchill himself on the interview, it is stated that U Saw said he had no doubt that the British Government would at some date implement its declared policy of granting Burma self-government, but that he felt bound to ask whether self-government within the Empire could not be definitely promised to have effect immediately after the war. The Prime Minister gives as his reply that in the middle of a mortal struggle it was no time to raise constitutional matters. Burma's future depended upon whether Britain won the war. If Britain did win, the constitutional issue would be settled in a liberal manner.

U Saw, disappointed at Chequers, sought to get a more precise assurance from Amery himself, but Amery could do no more than tell him he should trust the British to advance Burma towards full responsible government as soon as it was possible to do so. Amery wrote to Dorman-Smith: 'We are to have more talks on the constitutional problem and I must try to see if there is anything in the nature of a statement, possibly

## *U Saw*

embodied in a letter, which I could give him which would be any help to him without embarrassing the future or going beyond what the War Cabinet has approved. Anyway, you may be sure that I will do my best to help you in your far from easy task.'

U Saw, who seems to have hoped to the last, left England in November, disillusioned and angry. It was part of his tour programme that he should visit the United States and from thence go home across the Pacific. He and Tin Tut set off for Washington, where he hoped to see President Roosevelt and persuade him to intercede with Churchill. Needless to say, he was equally unsuccessful there. Roosevelt, perhaps briefed from London if he asked for information, could see nothing in U Saw's request warranting interference in what was evidently a matter for the British to settle.

Since there was nothing further U Saw could do, he and his secretary obtained seats, after some delay, on a plane to Hawaii, from where they would continue via the Philippines to Burma. It so happened that they landed in Hawaii on 8 December, the day after Pearl Harbour, and as they came in saw the sunken American fleet. War with Japan meant no more passenger flights westwards and the two Burmese had to return to America and thence fly home eastwards via Portugal.

On reaching Lisbon there was the usual delay waiting for a plane to take them on. While in America U Saw had called on the Japanese Consul General to enquire how the Burmese students in Japan would fare if war were declared. It occurred to him now to ask the Japanese Ambassador in Lisbon the same question. U Tin Tut did not accompany him when he went to the Embassy. Whether he intended to speak to the Ambassador about Burma is unknown; that he did speak to him on that subject, however, is certain. British Intelligence had broken the Japanese ciphers and all messages from the Lisbon Embassy were regularly de-coded. The day after U Saw had been to see him, the Ambassador sent home a message describing the interview. He had had, he said, a quite unexpected visit from no less a person than the Burmese Premier, en route from America to his own country. The Premier had informed him that if the Japanese invaded

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Burma, the Burmese would rise against the British and join in driving them out. He himself, if still in power, would do what he could for the Japanese.

British Intelligence intercepted and decoded this message. On seeing it, Amery thought it would be imprudent to let U Saw return to Burma. No doubt the Ambassador had made as big a story as he could out of his lucky meeting with the Burmese Premier, but even so it was evident that U Saw must have given him some grounds for what he wrote. The decision was taken to arrest him at Haifa, where his plane would touch down. This was done and U Tin Tut was arrested with him, as was reported in the London press on 19 January 1942.

## CHAPTER V

### *On the Eve*

U Saw's absence had required the appointment of an acting Premier and Sir Paw Tun was chosen. He had held portfolios in the preceding ministries of Ba Maw, U Pu and U Saw, an achievement due to his judgment and character and which gave him almost the standing of a senior statesman. In his younger days, as schoolmaster, lawyer and official interpreter, he had had wide experience of the British administration, and as his knighthood testifies, was a believer in the British connection. That so moderate a man should be able to succeed U Saw and hold the ministry together requires a further word of explanation. The truth is that there were in Burma, as in other countries, many who prided themselves on being sensible and practical men of the world. Their inclination was to trust the British. Without considering themselves any less patriotic than those who demanded a promise of freedom in return for co-operation, they held that Burma would get all she wanted, if she was patient a little longer. More educated than politicians like U Saw and with a wider knowledge of Europe than the Thakins, they understood and valued European civilisation, its sciences, arts, books, comforts. They were great admirers of the best in British character, and conceived that the British occupation had conferred notable benefits, though the time was approaching when it should become a partnership. These people had a real liking for us, and their opinion of our goodwill and generosity was probably higher than we deserved. Had we done more for them in early days, they would have been able to do more for us.

Sir Paw Tun belonged to this class. His reading left him in



no doubt that the Allied cause was just and should be supported without reserve. To abandon a just cause in the hope of benefit from those upholding an unjust cause seemed to him unworthy of a Buddhist nation. The Burmese should not yield to Japanese temptations. The free peoples would prevail over the tyrants. If Burma shared in a righteous victory she could not be a loser in the long run. Such were Paw Tun's views. As much as U Saw or the Thakins, he desired to see Burma a sovereign state, but he believed that he could guide her to the goal more surely his way than they could by theirs. Similar views were held by the Finance Minister, U Htoon Aung Gyaw, afterwards knighted. Such an outlook was shared, moreover, by a quantity of more humble people all over the country, who without the intelligentsia's grasp of affairs in general had a devout respect for what in the Buddhist canon is called right action. Allied to the intelligentsia was the considerable class of government servants, Burmese and Indian, and Anglo-Burmese and Anglo-Indian, which included the subordinate magistracy, the police, and their clerical staffs, all men more interested in promotion and a quiet life than in the manoeuvres of politicians and who, though they would have been astonished to be called unpatriotic, were not members of the parties which with their various slogans sought to rouse the populace to demand political freedom.

All this body of moderate opinion made itself felt on U Saw's departure. The Thakin party, the extreme left, was seemingly in eclipse for the moment. Its power was further reduced when Sir Paw Tun began to arrest those of its leaders not already in gaol, among them Thakin Nu, the future Premier of independent Burma.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after U Saw's departure the Japanese menace had increased. They entered fully into occupation of Indo-China and were gaining control of Siam. The sanctions, cutting off their supplies of oil and steel, which America and Britain had declared against them on 26 July with the intention of causing them to stop moving westwards and withdraw, had not had that effect. They

<sup>1</sup>Thakin Nu subsequently dropped the designation Thakin and is now addressed as U Nu, the word U being analogous in Burmese to our word Mr.

made a show, however, of negotiating at Washington. We know now that they had already decided on war and were preparing their Pearl Harbour surprise. But in November 1941 it still seemed impossible to believe that they would be so rash as to fight America, a country whose mainland they could not hope to attack and whose production, operating there unchecked, would soon create overwhelming forces. Churchill could not credit them with such folly, and said as much in his speech at the Guildhall Banquet of 11 November: 'It would seem a very hazardous adventure for the Japanese people to plunge quite needlessly into a world struggle.'

In the course of August-September Air Chief Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham, the C.-in-C. Far Eastern Command, had come up from Singapore and made an inspection tour in Burma. The idea at the time was that a Japanese attack, if it came, would be against the northern end of the eastern frontier, where the Shan States lay. The country here, though difficult and roadless, offered much less of an obstacle than the southern end in Tenasserim. Sir Robert had therefore placed the greater part of the single Burma Division on the Shan States border. Only one brigade (2 Burma Brigade) guarded the five hundred mile stretch of Tenasserim. The Japanese move into Indo-China suggested that, if the sanctions did not stop them, their next step would be into Siam. That would put them against the Burmese frontier, both the Shan States section and Tenasserim. Sir Robert, taking his cue from the Chiefs of Staff, his Intelligence having provided him with nothing to the contrary, concluded that the sanctions would stop them. Burma's situation did not unduly alarm him, though if it had he could have done nothing to increase the garrison there, as he had no strategic reserve. He stayed a few days at Government House in Maymyo, the official hill station on the Shan plateau. Though Dorman-Smith had no different sources of information, his views had never been as optimistic as the Chiefs of Staff's. Brooke-Popham's calm alarmed him. He wired the Secretary of State that though military postings were not his business he did think that a more dynamic personality was needed at Singapore.

Churchill, disturbed by the news of Japan's advance into Indo-China, though it did not make him change his view that for her to declare war would be suicidal folly, felt the want of a reliable report on the political problems arising in the Far East, and selecting for the task Mr Duff Cooper,<sup>1</sup> then Minister of Information, a man of whose judgment he had a high opinion, appointed him Minister of State and sent him out to Singapore. His duties took Duff Cooper in due course to Rangoon, where he arrived with his wife, Lady Diana, in the first week of October. He has recorded in his autobiography, *Old Men Forget*, impressions of the visit. Dorman-Smith was in Maymyo, five hundred miles north, and the Duff Coopers had some hours in Rangoon before going up country to stay with him. Anxious to see the sights, they drove to the Shwedagon Pagoda, conducted by one of Dorman-Smith's A.D.C.s. Lady Diana, already irritated by the colonial atmosphere of British society in Rangoon, which seemed to her excessively dull and *démodé*, was in the mood to do something startling. She had been told at tea that to enter the Shwedagon you had to go barefoot, but that, as it was a filthy place and the Burmese, moreover, had made the rule just to annoy, no English people went nowadays. That was enough for her. As soon as the car stopped opposite the enormous white leogryphs which sit at the foot of the main stairway, she exclaimed: 'I'm going in.' Duff Cooper hinted that it would be better not, but my friend, Tony Keswick, who was in the car, tells me that he egged her on. She has written a spirited account of what happened, which is quoted in *Old Men Forget*. In a flash she had her shoes and stockings off and was mounting the high dark corridor of the stairs, which seemed to her like an enchanted cave. After an hour on the platform alone among the Burmese she returned radiant to the entrance. She had broken through the barrier. The Burmese were no longer strangers.

After this almost visionary experience, the official dinner which had been arranged seemed very tedious. One of the guests was Sir Paw Tun, the Premier, to her eyes somewhat droll, for she describes him thus: 'The acting Prime Minister, complete in

<sup>1</sup> Later 1st Viscount Norwich of Aldwick.

sarong, black buttoned boots, native black jacket, bright pink headkerchief and white European shirt with gold collar stud, but no collar (*de rigueur*).’ The dinner dragged. Her ascent of the Shwedagon was discussed under the breath by the British officials who were present. At sight of their grave faces, she was delighted to have shocked them. After dinner she and Duff Cooper left for Maymyo by train to stay with Dorman-Smith.

In the paragraphs given to this tour in his book, Duff Cooper suggests that Dorman-Smith and he agreed that British rule in Burma had been stuffy and selfish. Where they disagreed was over the danger of a Japanese invasion. Duff Cooper’s view did not differ from Brooke-Popham’s. He told a military audience in Maymyo that he thought it hardly likely they would see active service.

At the end of October Burma had another important visitor. General Wavell<sup>1</sup> had succeeded General Auchinleck as C.-in-C. India at the end of June 1941. Churchill in his great book relates with feeling how the multifarious duties which had fallen on Wavell during the time he was C.-in-C. Middle East had tired him. He had won great victories and suffered great disasters. He had been tremendously affected in particular by the breach of his desert flank by Rommel on 17 June. General Ismay is quoted as having written: ‘I seem to remember Eden saying that Wavell had aged ten years in the night.’ Churchill, conscious that a new eye and a new hand were needed in the Middle East, reluctantly ordered him to change places with Auchinleck. How high the Prime Minister rated him is evident in the letter where he informed Roosevelt of the change: ‘Wavell has a glorious record . . . I must regard him as our most distinguished General.’ The idea was that he should rest in India, as it was unlikely that there would be war in that part.

In September, after a couple of months in Delhi, Wavell had paid a short visit to London to press on the Chiefs of Staff the advisability of restoring Burma to the India command, which his predecessor, Auchinleck, had urged. Of this matter he writes:<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Afterwards Field-Marshal Viscount Wavell of Cyrenaica and Winchester.

<sup>2</sup>See para. 3 of Wavell’s despatch on *Operations in Burma*.

'The Chiefs of Staff . . . refused to alter the existing arrangement, on the ground that the question had been fully considered when the Far Eastern Command was established. The Japanese by this time had invaded Indo-China, and thus brought danger to Burma much closer, but this fact was not held to justify the change.' On his return from London, being convinced that Burma was vital to the defence of India but being ignorant of its capacity, he was debating what to do, when he received Cabinet instructions to visit Burma. After informing Brooke-Popham of his intention, he arrived in Rangoon towards the end of October. He looked round, had discussions with Dorman-Smith, saw Lt.-General McLeod, the G.O.C., and went on to Singapore to talk with Brooke-Popham. In result, he became the first senior military officer to realise Burma's danger and her weakness. In the despatch already cited he says of this visit: 'I was very greatly concerned by the extent of unpreparedness in Burma's defences of which I became aware during my visit. I realised that the number and training of the troops, their equipment, the Intelligence layout, the size and organisation of the staff, the administrative system and the defensive arrangements were quite inadequate.' And he goes on to say: 'The neglect of Burma's defences during the early part of the war was understandable. There seemed little pressing danger even should Japan decide to attack Great Britain. Burma was protected on the East by two neutral states, Thailand and Indo-China, both of which professed their intention to defend themselves against Japanese aggression . . . So long as Singapore remained in British possession, there was little danger of a threat from seaward.' But, he continues, when Japan entered Indo-China in July 1941, more attention should have been paid to Burma's deficiencies. As it was, nothing had been done. The current strategical plan obscured the fact that Burma was India's bastion rather than Singapore's rear. The root of all was the error of having placed Burma under Singapore instead of under India.

As a visiting General, who had come to discuss the defence of Burma in so far as it concerned his own command in India, Wavell had no authority to criticise the commanders on the spot or give any orders. But what he could do, he did. He writes:

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'I cabled to the Chief of the Imperial General Staff on 11 November 1941 again recommending the transfer of Burma to the Indian Command. I understand that my recommendation was supported by the Governor of Burma. . . . I initiated the despatch to Burma of an additional Indian Infantry Brigade and battery. I also took up the question of the construction of an all-weather road from Assam to Burma as a matter of immediate urgency.'

So at last the long-discussed India-Burma road was admitted to be a necessity. But it was late to start making a road two hundred and fifty-five miles in length, when only twenty-seven days remained before Japan struck.<sup>1</sup> As for the brigade, when it is remembered that the troops in Burma only amounted to a division (though they were not organised as a division), the meagreness of the reinforcement is apparent. But Wavell had no more troops to send. It was one thing to discover Burma's weakness, another to get it relieved rapidly. He begged for reinforcements from outside, but no action was taken until after the Japanese declared war.

Of Wavell on this visit Sir Reginald has said to me: 'His mere presence made us all feel much better. He had the wonderful power of inspiring confidence. Small, stocky, not very approachable, yet very kind, he reminded you of the famous physician, the Harley Street specialist, who is called in at the last minute and whom everyone expects will know what to do to save the patient.' As we shall see, a second famous physician had to be called in later, but all he could do was to conduct the funeral.

At this date, of course, Dorman-Smith confidently hoped the patient could be saved; it never entered his head that in six months he and all his companions would have been driven out of Burma.

<sup>1</sup>Moreover, it could not be started until the military authorities had decided on the alignment and surveyed it. The Indian Government did not commence its end of the road till January, about a month after the Japanese war began. By then the flight of labour made it impossible for the Burma Government to do more than improve the existing track at its end, making it just possible for motor transport in dry weather.

## CHAPTER VI

### *Japan Strikes*

THE Japanese attack fell sooner and more suddenly than even the most perspicacious foresaw. It was also on a much larger scale, and pushed with greater energy, more craft and skill. As early as 24 November the force of warships and planes, detailed to destroy the American fleet in Pearl Harbour a fortnight later, had assembled at a secret rendezvous in the Kuriles. Even while it steamed towards the target, the faked negotiations going on at Washington were still interpreted as a genuine desire by the Japanese to reach a settlement. Churchill, indeed, divining that it was touch and go, had sent the battle cruisers, *Prince of Wales* and *Repulse*, to Singapore, where they arrived on 2 December. His hope was that this display of naval strength would give pause. But the presence of these two capital ships was a matter of indifference to the Japanese. This was revealed on 6 December when Japanese men-of-war and troopships were sighted by a Singapore reconnaissance plane making across the Gulf of Siam. Events then succeeded each other with stunning rapidity. At dawn on 7 December the American fleet was destroyed at Pearl Harbour and at midnight the Japanese began landing an army near Singora on the border of Siam and Malaya, some four hundred miles north of Singapore. On 10 December they sank by air attack the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse*, and thus in four days had made an end of the American and British Pacific fleets. Then, on 15 December, they sent troops across Siamese territory at the Isthmus of Kra, five hundred miles to the north of Singora, and took Victoria Point, the southernmost town in Burma. Victoria Point had an airfield, one in the chain

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connecting India with Singapore. By taking this link, the Japanese cut the air communications between these two places, making it very difficult to reinforce Singapore with planes, the arm in which it was weakest and without which it was an indefensible position, a very death trap. With Victoria Point airfield in their possession the Japanese were able in a few days to put out of action the defenceless airfields at Mergui and Tavoy, towns between Victoria Point and Rangoon, and so open the way for their troops to take both places, and thence methodically begin the advance on the capital with three airfields close at their backs.<sup>1</sup>

One of the great scenes in Churchill's *The Second World War*<sup>2</sup> is where he describes his feelings when late in the evening of 7 December he heard the news of Pearl Harbour and immediately rang up Roosevelt to confirm it and learn if America were declaring war. On hearing she would do so next day, his emotion was unbounded. His immediate grasp of the implications is highly relevant in the present context. 'I do not pretend to have measured accurately the martial might of Japan, but now at this very moment I knew the United States was in the war, up to the neck, and in to the death. So we had won after all. . . . We had won the war. England would live; Britain would live; the Commonwealth of Nations and the Empire would live. . . . Hitler's fate was sealed. Mussolini's fate was sealed. As for the Japanese they would be ground to powder. . . . I expected terrible forfeits in the East; but all this would be merely a passing phase. . . . Being saturated and satiated with emotion and sensation, I went to bed and slept the sleep of the saved and thankful.'

Dorman-Smith has a record in his papers of Rangoon's reaction to these events on 8 December: 'When I met my Ministers their attitude was robustly anti-Japanese; there was not even a hint that public opinion should have been consulted before plunging the country into war. Sir Paw Tun in a statement to the

<sup>1</sup>The Japanese opening gambit was a great surprise. The attack on Singapore was now seen to be a land attack down the peninsula, instead of a sea attack. Burma was invaded at its southern point instead of on the central east frontier in the Shan States, and was invaded before the advance on Singapore began.

<sup>2</sup>Vol. iii, 537 *seq.*



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press said: "Burma is prepared and I am sure that the country will not be found lacking in any effort to resist aggression by the enemy." The G.O.C. Burma issued an Order of the Day: "In the air, on the sea, and on the land, Burma is ready to repulse any foe. It is with every confidence that I call on the soldiers to face the enemy with calmness and courage. We shall throw back the invaders and free Burma for ever from the threat which has dawned today."'

This mood of confidence and high optimism was not shared by everybody. There was a sharp demand for tickets at the steamship booking offices by Indians of the upper class, who did not like the look of things and thought it safer to return at once to their own country. But on the whole, says Dorman-Smith, 'the general atmosphere was one of calm preparedness, amounting almost to complacency,' even after the sinking of the *Prince of Wales* and the *Repulse* on 10 December. So much so that on 17 December, two days after the Japanese entry into Victoria Point, he thought it prudent to declare in an address at the City Hall that 'we should prepare both our ways of life and our minds for a long and bitter struggle'. He knew well that Burma was not prepared and anticipated evil days, though not as evil as were to be.

During the next week or so urgent appeals were made for help—more troops, more aeroplanes, more guns, more fire-fighting equipment. Burma's nearest ally was Chiang Kai-Shek. He had lost his ports to the Japanese and, cut off from western supplies, would have been destroyed, had he not constructed, in 1938, the Burma Road, which ran from the inland capital, Chungking, to Rangoon, a distance of about two thousand miles. It was up this road that the Americans sent him lease-lend munitions. We have seen too, how he had been able to employ an American volunteer air force. He now offered his aid to Burma. He had two armies<sup>1</sup> in Yunnan, the border province. These he would send to reinforce Burma's one division. A squadron of the American Volunteer Group would also be placed at the disposal of the

<sup>1</sup>A Chinese army was about as large as a British division, but not as well armed or organised.

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British authorities. Churchill, too, promised reinforcements from Europe and Wavell announced that he would be arriving in a few days.

• It should be noted that, though Churchill's refusal to give U Saw a promise was known in Burma some weeks before the events just described, it did not affect the Ministers' attitude. Despite the former decision to make co-operation contingent on the promise they continued to co-operate. That they took this course was no doubt partly due to the moderation advised by Sir Paw Tun, partly due to fear, excitement and anger when the sudden violation of Burmese territory occurred at Victoria Point, and partly to their personal attachment to the Governor, who had made as good friends with them as with U Saw. That he was able to enter the war with his government behind him was an incalculable advantage. As the Japanese advanced into the country, it would have been easy for the Ministers to have sent them emissaries and come to an understanding, as U Saw told the Japanese Ambassador at Lisbon that he would do. Had they done so, the population would have followed their lead, and, as the British army, worsted in battle after battle, outnumbered, outflanked, harried from the air, strove to withdraw, would have refused provisions, transport and labour, and by destroying roads and bridges on the line of retreat, have slowed it up and so delivered the exhausted troops to their pursuers. As it was, nothing of the kind was to happen. The Ministers remained faithful to the last dreadful minute, and the people bent their heads to the storm in the hope that it would pass over without destroying them.

But the storm, which was about to blow the British out of Burma, was carrying in the man destined to deliver the Burmese. Eighteen months before, when the leaders of the extreme left, the Thakin party, were being arrested by U Saw, one of them, a youth of twenty-four, called Thakin Aung San, had evaded arrest by fleeing the country and taking refuge in Japan. He, with thirty companions, afterwards to be called The Thirty, was now marching in with the Japanese. Unknown to everyone, the founder of the Republic had arrived.



*B.O.A.C. photograph*

3. Aerial view of Rangoon with Shwedagon Pagoda



*'Topical' Press Agency photograph*

4. General Wavell

## CHAPTER VII

### *Wavell brings Hope*

Wavell arrived in Rangoon on 21 December. Some of the good news he brought preceded him, for Dorman-Smith had had a wire from Churchill on 15 December. 'Wavell has been placed in charge of military and air defence of Burma. We have diverted 18 Division, four fighter squadrons, and A.A. and A.T. guns, which are rounding the Cape, to Bombay for him to use as he thinks best. The battle in Libya goes well, but I cannot move any air from there till decision is definitely reached. All preparations are being made to transfer four to six bomber squadrons to your theatre the moment the battle is won. Every good wish. Prime Minister.'<sup>1</sup>

This meant that Burma had at last been put back under the C.-in-C. India, and that a British division, which would more than double the forces then in Burma, was only some thirty days distant on the sea.

Wavell was able to improve on this splendid prospect. He told Dorman-Smith that in addition to being allotted 18 Division, he had been released by Whitehall from the commitment to send 17 Indian Division to Iraq, and was promised four squadrons of fighters and six squadrons of bombers from the Middle East. Furthermore, he had promise of two brigades of African troops from Italian East Africa. These forces, if sent to Burma, would increase the army there from one to nearly four divisions and the aircraft from two squadrons to sixteen. 'Thus when I visited Rangoon on 21 December I had, as I thought, ample forces in

<sup>1</sup>Published in Churchill's *The Second World War*, iii, 565.

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sight for the defence of Burma,' he wrote afterwards in his despatch.

But as none of these reinforcements were actually at hand, the question was how to manage until they arrived. There was no plan ready to meet the new situation. The sudden capture of Victoria Point, the heavy bombing of the airfields at Mergui and Tavoy, and the threat of invasion at other points on the southern frontier, had upset all previous calculations. In his despatch Wavell says that Lt.-General McLeod,<sup>1</sup> the G.O.C., had sent him an appreciation in the middle of December, in which the maximum scale of Japanese attack was estimated at one or two divisions on the north-eastern (Shan States) section of the frontier, and at one division on the south-eastern frontier in Tenasserim, the narrow piece of Burma from Moulmein to Victoria Point. But Brooke-Popham and London had told him that the Japanese were unlikely to attack with such forces while engaged in a campaign against Singapore. Intelligence was still of this view. If that were so, there seemed to be a little breathing space to make a plan and start it working. To take some immediate offensive action was very desirable, but there were no planes to send into Siam to bomb Japanese concentrations, nor were there troops to make an attempt to drive the Japanese from Victoria Point. Yet to wait for the Japanese to develop their attack was a miserable policy. What then to do?

Well, there was Chiang Kai-Shek's offer to send troops. In discussing this with Wavell, Dorman-Smith was obliged to point out that from the civil point of view the offer was not as good as it looked. Letting Chinese forces into the country might be unpleasant. How would they treat the Burmese population? They were said to be ill-equipped, ill-trained and ill-disciplined in comparison with troops under British command. The Ministers were against having them; it was no time to upset the people. Then it had to be considered that if Chiang Kai-Shek poured his soldiers in, they would soon outnumber the British. Would they go when no longer required? The Chinese had an old claim that Burma was really a feudatory of the former Chinese empire, and had

<sup>1</sup>Now Lt.-General Sir Kenneth McLeod, K.C.I.E., etc.

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never recognised the British annexation. The offer of troops might be a ruse to regain possession. They might pose as liberators of the Burmese. It was now definitely known that the Japanese were doing this, for they had dropped over the Tenasserim area in the south a quantity of leaflets calling on the Burmese to welcome them as friends.

Such were the political arguments against accepting help from China and, since there was promise of ample reinforcements on the British side, would it not be better to seek another way of tiding over the interval before they arrived?

But no plan for protecting Burma without Chinese aid seemed feasible and Wavell resolved to fly to Chungking the next day (22 December) and hold a consultation with Chiang Kai-Shek. The Chinese were our allies. They had been fighting Japan for years. We had no option but to treat them as allies. Their troops might not be much good, but they would be some good.

Before leaving for China Wavell wired the Chief of the Imperial General Staff for two bomber and two modern fighter squadrons, the most urgent of Burma's needs, since Rangoon was wide open to air attack. He also appointed Lt.-General Hutton<sup>1</sup> in Lt.-General McLeod's place. Of General McLeod he says in his despatch: 'He had done his best with the very little available to him.' General Hutton, as Chief of Staff in India, was an officer deemed better fitted to undertake the reorganisation of the Burma Command, required in view of the large reinforcements which were coming. These urgent matters seen to, he set off. On the same day Lt.-General Pownall, who had been sent out by Churchill to relieve Brooke-Popham, flew from Rangoon to Singapore.

In 1941 Chiang Kai-Shek was fifty-four years old and had been in power for fifteen years. Fighting against Communists and ruthless warlords who wanted his place, the adventures he had had, his battles, his escapes, were already the subject of several books. Since Japan entered Manchuria in 1931 he had witnessed the gradual dismemberment of China. The home provinces were invaded in 1937. He had been driven back and back and com-

<sup>1</sup>Afterwards Lt.-General Sir Thomas Hutton, K.C.I.E.

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pelled to move the capital to Chungking, on the upper waters of the Yangtse, more than a thousand miles from Peking. Its situation was so remote and the approach to it so difficult that hitherto the Japanese had been unable to get at him, though their bombers continually blasted the city. But his position was precarious, his military resources small. Now the Japanese invasion of Burma threatened his only link with the western powers. Nevertheless, he had led China for so long and his resistance to the invaders had been so tenacious, that he had become the chief personality in Asia. In appearance he was a spare man, of good height for a Chinese, with closely cropped hair and a moustache, who smiled perpetually, an unconscious artifice. In some outward respects a cosmopolitan, he was the true Chinese of tradition with his classical education and his poor opinion of foreign culture. Though he had never been to Europe, he could understand some English, but refused to speak it. His wife used to speak it for him; she had been educated in America. He regarded the British as intruders in Asia and did not care for them as individuals. Americans he liked better as they were not a colonial power and were supplying him free with munitions and aircraft.

Such was the man with whom Wavell spent 23 and 24 December in consultation. The upshot of their talks is in Wavell's despatch. Chiang Kai-Shek made the definite offer of his Fifth and Sixth Armies. Wavell accepted at once the Sixth Army which was already on the Burmese frontier, except for one division. The Fifth Army, he thought, should remain where it was at Kunming, in case the Japanese invaded China from Hanoi, a contingency which Chiang Kai-Shek himself had not long before represented as their most probable move.

Wavell was blamed afterwards for not having taken all the Chinese troops offered, which, it was alleged, might have saved Burma. Some of his reasons for not doing so have already been mentioned and he had others. He says in his despatch: 'I had at the time every reason to suppose that I should have ample British, Indian or African troops available to defend Burma, which did not seem immediately threatened; obviously it was



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desirable that a country of the British Empire should be defended by Imperial Troops rather than by foreign.' And he goes on to explain that as the Chinese armies had no commissariat, the Burma Government would have to feed them, which would be no easy job in the turmoil of an invasion. If not properly fed they would start looting. One army was enough to begin with and anyhow only one army was ready to come at once. But his prudent decision not to take on an unmanageable number of Chinese troops disappointed Chiang Kai-Shek, who for devious political reasons, difficult to define more precisely than I have attempted to do, desired to get his armies into Burma. He became less ready to oblige. The Americans had agreed in principle to letting Burma have a share of the lease-lend arms landed in Rangoon, if the Chinese also agreed. When asked to concur, Chiang Kai-Shek made no definite reply. Nor would he promise that his American fighter squadron, assigned for the defence of Rangoon, would be left there. The meeting, in sum, was not altogether satisfactory. Wavell could not make out exactly what was in Chiang Kai-Shek's mind. Chiang Kai-Shek on his side found Wavell's downright nature baffling.

At dawn on Christmas Day Wavell left Chungking in an aircraft with Chinese markings and an American crew to fly back to Rangoon. The pilot lost his bearings, strayed into Siam and was heading for Bangkok, where the Japanese were in force, before he discovered (prompted it is said by Wavell himself) that he was off his course. The plane turned westwards. Presently they saw what the pilot declared must be Akyab. A landing was made on the airfield.

But it was Moulmein, at the mouth of the Salween, the town near the frontier between Burma and Siam, three hundred miles south-east of Akyab. Brigadier Bourke was in command there of 2 Burma Brigade. When his men had seen the strange plane with Chinese markings, they first thought it a Japanese and nearly opened fire. Bourke now walked across to find out who had arrived. Could it be General Hutton, the new G.O.C.<sup>1</sup> It was

<sup>1</sup>General Hutton did not actually arrive in Rangoon until 27 December, two days later, to take over from General McLeod.

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with astonishment that he recognised the Commander-in-Chief, General Wavell. He saluted and asked what he could do. 'I would like something to eat,' said Wavell. 'We got him sandwiches as quickly as possible as he wanted to leave at once,' Bourke records.

The plane was soon heading for Rangoon, a hundred miles west across the Gulf of Martaban. Unsuspected by Wavell and his companions, a Japanese force of some eighty bombers and thirty fighters was coming along behind and bound for the same destination. Wavell had a narrow escape. Hardly had his plane touched down at Mingaladon, the Rangoon airport, twelve miles north of Rangoon, when the Japanese squadrons came tearing up. He had just time to throw himself into a slit trench before the bombs began to fall.

## CHAPTER VIII

### *The Bombing of Rangoon*

**D**uring Wavell's short absence in China, Rangoon had had an experience which profoundly shook the population and confronted the government with problems of the utmost complexity. The day after he left for Chungking (23 December), the Japanese, who so far had confined their attacks to the towns in Tenasserim, two hundred and fifty miles to the south-east, sent about seventy bombers escorted by thirty fighters against the capital. The siren went at 10 a.m. and forty minutes later (the warning system, by telegraph from observers in Tenasserim, was quite good<sup>1</sup>) the attack commenced. Rangoon had no anti-aircraft guns<sup>2</sup> or balloons and depended entirely on its two squadrons of fighters.<sup>3</sup> They took off and engaged the raiders, but could not stop them from dropping bombs on the Mingaladon airport and on the city, particularly the dock area. The streets were crowded with people, the Burmese, Indians and Chinese who made up the population of 400,000. They did not at once

<sup>1</sup>The watchers were Burmese perched on platforms up trees. Of one of these look-out men Eric Battersby, A.D.C. to the Governor, relates that he was mistaken by the peasants for a hermit, the kind, like our Simon Stylites, who sits at the top of a pillar or pole, rare in Burma, but known in India. They brought him offerings of food which they laid reverently at the bottom of the tree. Finding it more profitable to be a holy man than a spotter he cultivated his sacred role to the detriment of his military duties, and, on his employers discovering his delinquency, was dismissed.

<sup>2</sup>There was one old gun, and it is reputed to have made one hit—with its first shot!

<sup>3</sup>The R.A.F. squadron of Buffaloes and the American Volunteer Group's squadron of Tomahawks, which after Pearl Harbour had moved down, with Chiang's permission, from Magwe to Mingaladon.

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realise their danger, the planes seemed so high and far away. An official account states: 'Along Strand Road hundreds of Indian coolies were interested spectators of the dog fights overhead; on these unfortunates stick after stick of anti-personnel bombs rained down.' In a moment the pavements were strewn with the dead and dying. There followed a terrible panic. The civil defence, rescue and medical services broke down because nearly all their staff fled the city. The report continues: 'The handful that were left made superhuman efforts to cope with the carnage but most of the wounded were left unattended until volunteers could be obtained. By then many of them had succumbed to their injuries; others died from shock and haemorrhage after being admitted to hospital.' Altogether 2,000 people were killed, 750 died later and 1,700 were wounded. Forty fires were started and the Botataung quarter east of the main docks was gutted. Had it not been that the Fire Brigade stood fast, the whole city, mostly of wooden houses, would have been burnt to the ground.

The defending two squadrons, however, managed to shoot down eleven Japanese planes for the loss of three American. As only the Americans had up-to-date machines, this was more than could have been expected. Indeed, the losses inflicted on the enemy were so heartening that the real seriousness of the raid was not immediately evident. This did not lie in the considerable casualties nor in the military damage done, which was small, but in the flight of the labouring population, particularly of the Indians. As Dorman-Smith put it in his wire next day to Amery: 'Most pressing problem is complete exodus of menial labour. Work has practically come to a standstill. . . . Frankly I did not expect this situation to arise to such a pronounced degree.' Without labour the port was dead, the only port in Burma where merchant ships could be unloaded, the sole means of entry for military supplies and reinforcements, without which there could be no sustained resistance to an invasion. How to deal with the refugees? Could they be induced to return and stay in the camps prepared for them close to the city? These questions and others connected with them became henceforth the main preoccupation of the government.

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Rangoon was still stunned by this first blow when the Japanese followed it two days later by the raid already mentioned of 25 December, which nearly gave them the Commander-in-Chief. This time they lost twenty-one machines and the R.A.F. about half a dozen, which, however, were irreplaceable as there were no reserves. The population suffered much less than on the first occasion, partly on account of the large exodus and partly because they took cover in shelters and slit trenches. But though the casualties only amounted to fifty, terror increased. The road from Rangoon to Prome, a distance of one hundred and eighty miles, carried a migrating horde of Tamils, Madrassis and Bengalis, set on making their way home to India. They refused to halt at the camps in the suburbs. From Prome there was known to be a track over the Arakan mountains by the Taungup pass, which would bring them eventually to their country. The Burmese who had evacuated Rangoon had not gone far; they were in the villages and monasteries outside. Their departure was no matter; few of them worked in the docks. 'The mass exodus of Indians was paralysing,' says the official report. 'The Indian coolie had provided the motive power for the city.' There was also the better class Indian 'without whom public transport ceased to function, bazaars remained closed, shops were shut and trade was at a standstill'. The great business machine, Rangoon, on which everything in Burma depended, had stopped working. The country was cut off from the outer world. Something had to be done, and that quickly.

Though the situation was worse than Dorman-Smith had foreseen, he *had* foreseen it in part and made provision. Mention has been made of how, soon after his arrival, he created with the consent of his Ministers the post of Chief Liaison Officer for just such an emergency. Philip Fogarty of the Indian Civil Service, who held the appointment, had authority to act without reference to departments, and had a special staff through which his orders could be carried out. He was a man of more independence of character than is usual in a bureaucracy and now set to work with immense energy to improvise some kind of order in the chaos prevailing. Fortunately the police had remained at their posts and the criminal class had not come out to burn and rob as they

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did later. He opened municipal shops and stocked them with food, requisitioned lorries from the Chinese and got gangs of convicts to burn the corpses.

• The main essential however was to get Indian labour back. In a report drawn up afterwards by Professor Pearn for the Government the scene on the road to Prome is depicted. 'On the afternoon of 26 December,' he writes, 'there was an unbroken stream of refugees crowding the road from Rangoon to Hmawbi, thirty miles away.' They were resolved to get to India by Prome and Taungup, a distance of three hundred and fifty miles, 'and with steady determination they faced the long march. . . . It was pitiful to see the persistence with which they clung to their little property.' The multitude was estimated at 100,000. To get them to turn back, Indians of position were induced to go out and reason with them. Some went as far as Prome, addressing the crowds on the way with loudspeakers. The refugees were told that accommodation with free food was waiting for them in the suburban camps. There they would be quite safe from bombs. Free transport would bring them to and from their work in the city. If they persisted in staying at Prome, rations could not be issued after seven days. And they were warned that the Taungup Pass was waterless and uninhabited and that in attempting to walk it they would perish of hunger and thirst or be devoured by wild animals. In addition to giving these admonitions the Government ordered the authorities at Prome to prevent the refugees from crossing the Irrawaddy to the west bank where the road to the pass began, an order which had the effect of closing that exit to India.

As a result, eighty per cent. of the refugees returned to Rangoon within a week and started work again. The port re-opened. The situation was saved. But the return of the labour, though essential if the country and the military were to be supplied, created other grave difficulties, as will appear. Indeed, as it turned out, bringing the Indians back exposed them to perhaps greater hardship than if it had been possible to let them go forward.

Meanwhile General Hutton, who assumed charge on 27 December, was taking a view of his new command. From the report he made which is published with Wavell's despatch, it is clear

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that he found many weaknesses over and above the deficiency of troops. He wrote: 'The Headquarters staff was totally inadequate and a few overworked staff officers were struggling to compete with problems quite beyond their powers. . . . There was no intelligence staff worthy the name. . . . We were usually in complete ignorance of what was happening just over the Thailand border. The same applied regarding internal intelligence.' (Though Victoria Point was taken by the Japanese on 15 December, Dorman-Smith was not sure of the fact as late as 20 December, for in his telegram to Amery he has: 'There is now some doubt whether the Japanese have occupied Victoria Point.' Such lack of Intelligence made it impossible to guess whereabouts the Japanese would make their main thrust and in what numbers.) Hutton goes on with his list of deficiencies. The various headquarters, Army, Corps, General and Lines of Communication, were all rolled into one. 'This organisation, or lack of it, clogged the whole machine. It also imposed an intolerable burden on the G.O.C. for he had to be everywhere at once.' The report continues that the eight fighting battalions of the Burma Rifles, more than half his force, were composed of raw troops, led by inexperienced young officers; and that no units had full transport, some none at all.

Hutton hoped, however, that he would have time to rectify some of these defects. And Wavell's promise of substantial reinforcements cheered him in his harassing situation, though he was to be cruelly disappointed.

What happened may be given in Wavell's own words. He writes in his despatch: 'When I returned to India (on 26 December) I found that the troops I was counting on for Burma were being taken from my control for the reinforcement of Malaya. Already the War Cabinet had ordered one brigade group of the 18 British Division and two brigades group of the 17 Indian Division to Malaya, as well as anti-aircraft artillery. The remainder of the 18 Division was also put under orders for Malaya shortly afterwards. Thus of the two complete divisions on which I had reckoned one brigade only remained.' He still believed the two African brigades available, but these never arrived.

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This failure to reinforce Burma is explained by the desperate situation in Malaya. The Japanese, using first class troops, including their Imperial Guards and a powerful air force, were rolling up the British army and advancing rapidly on Singapore. Loss of sea power and lack of air power put the British at a fatal disadvantage. The condition of the British troops by 23 December, only a fortnight after the Japanese landing at Singora, is reflected in a staff officer's comment quoted by Compton Mackenzie in his *Eastern Epic*: 'It can't go on like this. The troops are absolutely dead beat. The only rest they're getting is that of an uneasy coma as they squat in crowded lorries which jerk their way through the night. . . . They're bound to crack soon.' During the fortnight the Japanese had advanced one hundred and sixty miles to the Perak river and were within two hundred miles of Singapore. The War Cabinet's view was that Singapore must be defended to the last. If the Japanese took it, their fleet would dominate the Bay of Bengal, even the Indian Ocean to the mouth of the Red Sea. From it they could mount an attack on Australia. Besides these reasons there was another. The battle could not be broken off. It had to be fought to the bitter end because the British army could not get out of Malaya.

After events did not altogether support the contention that the loss of Singapore would put India and Australia in deadly peril. But in late December 1941 its possible loss was viewed with horror and dismay. It was inevitable therefore that the War Cabinet should divert 18 Division and the greater part of 17 Indian Division to reinforce the exhausted troops there.

Of such paramount importance was Singapore considered that Churchill now decided to send the best General available. He wired to Wavell on 29 December: 'You are the only man who has the experience of handling so many theatres at once and you know that we shall back you up and see that you have fair play. Everyone knows how dark and difficult the situation is.' In *The Second World War* where Churchill quotes this letter he adds: 'The offer which I had to make to General Wavell was certainly one which only the highest sense of duty could induce him to accept. It was almost certain that he would have to bear a load of defeat



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in a scene of confusion.' The 'several theatres' refer to the fact that Wavell was to be Supreme Commander of all Allied forces, air, land and sea, in the South-West Pacific area, with headquarters in Java. Burma was to be in his command, instead of remaining under the succeeding C.-in-C. India.

After only five months in India, where he had been sent to recuperate after his trials in Africa, Wavell was posted to conduct a forlorn hope. How forlorn it was he could not foresee, but he knew it was a desperate assignment. He did not hesitate for a second, but in accepting it he protested that Burma should remain under India for the reasons already accepted as valid. He was over-ruled in order to satisfy Chiang Kai-Shek who wished Burma to be in the South-West Pacific command for reasons of face too tedious to be explained here. Wavell thought this a serious military error. He writes in his despatch: 'From my headquarters in Java, 2,000 miles distant from Rangoon, and concerned as I was with an immense area and many international problems, it was impossible for me to give as close attention to the defence of Burma as was desirable; nor had I any reinforcements at my disposal to aid Burma. During the five weeks Burma remained under the South-West Pacific Command, I was only able to pay two hurried visits. . . . It was during these five weeks that the fate of Burma was determined.'

## CHAPTER IX

### *The Japanese take Tavoy and Mergui*

As 1941 passed into 1942, everyone in Rangoon was talking of the skill and gallantry of the air pilots and comparing them with the Battle of Britain heroes. In machines far inferior to the Japanese, the R.A.F. had gone up regardless of the odds against them and destroyed their share of the thirty-six Japanese planes shot down in the two raids. The Americans in their superior planes had, of course, been the determining factor. Rangoon would have been obliterated without them.

As the January days went by and the Japanese did not raid Rangoon again, it became gradually clear that the battle casualties they had suffered were the reason. Extraordinary to relate, the tiny Anglo-American force had established superiority in the Rangoon daylight sky. Raiders came but they confined their attentions to the Mingaladon airfield and attacked only under cover of darkness without doing much damage. But this happy immunity could not last long unless reinforcements were forthcoming.

On 1 January 1942 Air Vice-Marshal D. F. Stevenson took over the command of the R.A.F. from Group Captain Manning who had been in charge hitherto. Like Wavell, he came supported by a promise of large reinforcements—four fighter squadrons of Hurricanes, machines equal if not superior to the Japanese, six bomber squadrons of Blenheims and a reconnaissance squadron. The promise, like the promise for troops, was not kept. In his report<sup>1</sup> Stevenson shows how few fighters arrived: 'The maximum number of Hurricanes reached in action with the enemy was about 30 Hurricanes, i.e. the equivalent of 2 instead of 4

<sup>1</sup>Dated 22 May 1942, published in *London Gazette* of 5 March 1948.

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squadrons. This strength, moreover, fell away rapidly due to lack of reinforcing aircraft, proper operational facilities and absence of spares, and was on 11 February only 15 serviceable Hurricanes and on 5 March only 6.' As for bombers, he had never more than one squadron. The American Volunteer Group remained with their one squadron of fighters, though their commander, General Chennault, who was not under Stevenson, was continually threatening to leave, either because Chiang Kai-Shek wanted him in China, he said, or for some reason of his own, such as lack of facilities or dissatisfaction of his men. But in early January the air situation looked promising. No one thought that reinforcements would fail nor dreamed that before March was out there would be no fighters left and that the towns and troops would be at the mercy of a Japanese force of four hundred to five hundred bombers.<sup>1</sup> The military reinforcements, referred to in the last chapter, were also still confidently expected at this date. Dorman-Smith and Hutton did not know (what Wavell says he knew shortly after his return to India on 26 December) that 18 British Division was being redirected to Singapore. They both thought it was coming and not till 22 January did Dorman-Smith, grown anxious, wire Amery to find out where it was and ironically suggest that it must be becalmed while rounding the Cape.

For the first fortnight of January all seemed well enough. With no daylight raids, the returned labour was working steadily. There was nothing definite to indicate an early invasion on a large scale. Then all was changed.

Whereas on 10 January Dorman-Smith had wired Amery: 'Rangoon almost completely normal' and quoted the press as saying 'daylight robberies have begun again' as proof that the city was its usual self, on 14 January he had to report that suddenly ten thousand labourers had left the city, and started up the Prome road for India. When asked why they were leaving, they replied that Rangoon was about to be bombed for fifteen days on end, a rumour they had heard and firmly believed. Besides this exodus by road, forty thousand Indians were clamouring for steamer tickets. On 16 January Dorman-Smith wired: 'Labour

<sup>1</sup>Para. 52 of the Air Vice Marshal's Report.

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problem increasing in complexity. Coal situation on railways serious. Any amount in harbour but that is no good unless unloaded. . . . At present I feel a trifle defeated. We are dealing with an immense human problem as well as a military one.' No way of stopping the exodus was found this time. It continued steadily. Thousands of refugees piled up at Prome and cholera broke out. The Taungup pass to India had to be opened. From the last week of January onwards Rangoon labour crossed the Irrawaddy and disappeared up the pass. Later it was officially estimated that from first to last a hundred thousand Indians left that way. It alarmed everyone to see them go. It was as if they knew the ship was sinking. Their fate will be described further on.

Four days after the Indian exodus started, bad news from Tenasserim began to come in. The curious coastal strip of Burma known by that name is four hundred and sixty miles long and averages fifty miles broad. In its stretch from Moulmein to Victoria Point it is divided from Siam by a ridge of mountains, not very high but thickly covered with jungle. No one lived in this mountainous waste. It was without roads, but at certain points were passes with tracks leading over them, which, though hardly ever used, could be walked by travellers in the dry season from December to May. Leading to Moulmein were two such passes, the Kawkareik pass sixty miles east, and the Three Pagoda Pass, one hundred miles south-east. These were the routes taken by the old kings of Burma and Siam when invading each other's territories. Tabinshweti, Bayin-naung and Alaungpaya all went that way with their elephants, their cavalry, their Portuguese arquebusiers and their thousands of foot. Three hundred miles south of Moulmein was the pass behind Mergui, a trade route of great antiquity and much used by European merchants in the seventeenth century. And between these passes, behind Tavoy, the other chief town of Tenasserim, was a further pass, less known and more difficult to cross. Military opinion was that the Japanese were unlikely to invade Burma by any of these passes, as military transport and guns would be so difficult to get over. But the Japanese did invade by them. That was the bad news which began to come in about the middle of January.

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On 15 January an advanced party of Japanese, travelling very light, crossed the pass behind Tavoy. Two companies of 6 Burma Rifles, a regiment recently raised, were on patrol in the neighbourhood. The Japanese, using infiltration tactics, worked round to their rear and seized their transport. Finding themselves cut off from Tavoy, the two companies broke up and set out through the jungle in small parties for Moulmein. The Japanese main body, about a thousand well armed veteran soldiers, now made its way over the pass and advanced on Tavoy. The town fell on 19 January. In this rapid stroke, which gave them the whole of Tenasserim south of Moulmein, for it cut off Mergui a hundred miles to the south, the Japanese were accompanied by Thakin Aung San and The Thirty. Aung San got in touch with members of his party at Tavoy, which was a well known Thakin centre. These men came out and guided the Japanese through the jungle, so that they were able to approach the town almost unperceived. When it was taken, all the Thakins there joined Aung San's standard. It was here that he began to build up his Independence Army, which was first formed in Bangkok.

News of the Japanese advance on Tavoy soon reached Mergui. The commander of the few troops there saw that he must withdraw or be captured. To withdraw up the coast to Moulmein, a march of three hundred miles, part of it roadless and the whole length intersected with unbridged creeks, was impossible with the Japanese blocking the way at Tavoy. An evacuation by sea was the only course. On reporting to Rangoon, he was ordered to do this.

The local inhabitants had deserted the town after the aerodrome had been bombed in December and taken refuge in the archipelago, a maze of beautiful islands off the coast. But the English were still there, quite a number of them. Besides the Deputy Commissioner, Mr F. H. Yarnold, and the staff of the various administrative departments, there were rubber planters and tin miners, with their wives and children. On 20 January, the day after Tavoy fell, a ship arrived from Rangoon and took off most of the troops and a good many of the civilians. Some, however, remained to complete the demolitions and stayed until 22 Jan-

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uary. That night they embarked on small craft of various kinds, motor boats, junks and the *Curtana*, the Deputy Commissioner's steam launch, and under cover of darkness made for Tenasserim Island, fifty miles out to sea on the western edge of the archipelago. In that secluded spot another steamer would pick them up, with greater safety than if it entered the harbour, for the Japanese were close at hand and might appear at any moment. Everything that could be of military use to the enemy, such as petrol, rubber, boats, tin or money, had been destroyed. As these last ditchers pushed off from the Mergui jetty and looked back at the ridge above the town they may well have thought of Samuel White, the great filibuster of the seventeenth century who, after the massacre of his compatriots, escaped by night from that very spot with Captain Weltden of the frigate *Curtana*.<sup>1</sup> On reaching Tenasserim Island they were again treading on the heels of history. In the deep cove on the west side of the island White in the *Resolution* and Weltden in the *Curtana* had remained hidden awhile after their flight. To this very cove the refugee Englishmen now came, a party of them aboard another *Curtana*. The ship sent to fetch them arrived soon afterwards. Before embarking, they sank their boats, including the *Curtana*, which now lies at the bottom of the cove in five fathoms and by its name connects the spot with both the disaster of 1687 and of 1942.<sup>2</sup>

Yarnold, the Deputy Commissioner, reached Rangoon on 26 January and went next day to report to Dorman-Smith. He was downcast. The head of the British administration in Mergui, he had been looked up to and trusted by the people. But he had not been able to defend them; he had left them and fled. 'We will never be able to hold up our heads again in Mergui,' he said. Dorman-Smith tried to comfort him. He had been ordered to withdraw. All civil officers were to withdraw with the military. What was the good of being captured and interned? The Victoria Point officials had been taken; it was reported the same had happened at Tavoy, as orders to withdraw had not reached them.

<sup>1</sup>See chap. 38 of the present writer's *Siamese White*.

<sup>2</sup>These details were given me by Captain J. G. Hardy, now Harbour Master of Whitby, who was present.

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Luckily they had reached Mergui in time. But Mr Yarnold was not to be comforted. He said: 'I would rather have stayed and been taken prisoner.' His feeling was that, sensible though it might be, it was a disgrace to have gone. Dorman-Smith was affected by his melancholy. What, indeed, would the Burmese think of us? Lunacy to stay, disgraceful to go! What a dilemma! In his perplexity he wired that night to Amery: 'I hate the idea of deserting the local population.' This thought remained with him throughout all the disasters that were coming and was a constant distress. As the invasion increased and he was driven back, he knew the day might come when, face to face with the same problem that Yarnold faced, he would have to solve it for himself. Stay or abandon Burma, it was a cruel choice. Now in his wire he asked what Amery thought: 'I would welcome your views. My own view is that we all should stay.'

But with so much else to be thought of, there was no time to linger over gestures and punctilios. Tenasserim had gone in a flash, a stretch of four hundred and fifty miles in a week. It was a great shock, but not a great surprise. When Hutton had visited the area early in January he reported to Dorman-Smith that it was a difficult military problem; he did not think Tavoy defensible and would prepare for an evacuation. But full realisation of defeat only came with the fact. What would happen next? Would the Japanese advance up Tenasserim to Moulmein or would they strike directly at Moulmein from Siam? Or at the Shan States border three hundred miles to the north? Hutton, to provide against these possibilities, had already moved 16 Indian Brigade, which he held in reserve at Mandalay, to the Moulmein frontier in support of 2 Burma Brigade, hitherto the only brigade in Tenasserim. On the Shan border was the rest of 1 Burma Division under Major General Bruce Scott, consisting of 13 Indian Brigade, 1 Burma Brigade, and two batteries. Chiang's promise to Wavell to send Chinese troops to that sector to relieve the British had not yet been fulfilled. With his one and only division divided in this way, Hutton was very weak to resist an invasion.

Dorman-Smith's most immediate preoccupation was with the news that the Thakins of Tavoy had joined the Japanese. There

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were thousands of Thakins up and down the country. If they all joined the invaders, it would become a national revolt. The troops would be between two fires, the enemy in front, the Burmese behind. A rebellion added to an invasion! The only course was to arrest or detain all well-known Thakin leaders. The Premier, Paw Tun, was consulted. In result 'a drastic round-up of Thakins was ordered', as was reported to the Secretary of State. The whole party was proscribed. That Aung San was with the Japanese was not known at this time, and if it had been no particular importance would have attached to the fact, for his name as yet meant nothing.

It was at this crowded moment that the news of U Saw and U Tin Tut's arrest reached Burma. The London newspapers of 19 January gave it prominence with a photograph of U Saw on the front page. Just as his failure to secure a promise had caused little stir, so now his arrest was taken quietly. Inside his own party, the Myochit (Patriotic) as it was called, there was momentary indignation and the claim that he was innocent. But when Paw Tun advised that the vacancy in the Council of Ministers be filled by a Myochit man, the party accepted the offer and the nominee took the oath of allegiance.

Dorman-Smith sent over by air to Palestine Mr Stewart, a police chief, to assist the British officials who were examining Saw and Tin Tut at Haifa. Tin Tut's complicity had at first been assumed. But the Japanese Ambassador's intercepted cable did not incriminate him. There was no evidence that he accompanied U Saw to the embassy, nor that he had been told what was said. His record as an official, his character and his attainments made his conspiring with U Saw an improbability. He was too prudent to have followed him in what was a leap in the dark, too clear-headed to have entered so artless a plot, and one, too, which would have put him in U Saw's power. These and other reasons pointed to his innocence. At Haifa he and U Saw were being detained in a flat where microphones were fitted. The detectives listened but were unrewarded; they failed to hear either address a word to the other. However, though nothing was discovered to implicate Tin Tut, he remained under suspicion and,



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when U Saw was sent into detention in Uganda, had to go with him.<sup>1</sup>

But to return to the thread of this chapter. On 22 January the day Mergui was evacuated, Hutton and Stevenson came to see Dorman-Smith. A conference was usually held at Government House every day they were in Rangoon. Sometimes Hutton was in good spirits, today he looked grave. He produced a message from Major General Smyth, the commander of 17 Indian Division.<sup>2</sup> Smyth stated that the Japanese had appeared in force in the region of the Kawkareik pass behind Moulmein. Some ten thousand men were believed to be there, a full division. Our troops, said Hutton, are therefore greatly outnumbered. In the region of the pass is 16 Indian Brigade, which consists of a mountain battery, two Indian battalions and one of Burma Rifles, much under strength. In Moulmein itself there is 2 Burma Brigade under Brigadier Bourke, whose combatant strength is about three thousand.

This was very alarming news. It looked like the main invasion. Not only had the Japanese double the number of men, but a Japanese division was far better provided with artillery, machine guns and automatics than Indian divisions. Moreover, it was supported by aircraft, which the Moulmein brigades were without. The brigades, too, were half composed of soldiers with little training and no battle experience.

Dorman-Smith asked whether there was a chance of the Japanese thrust being held. Hutton replied there was a chance but obviously a very small one. And he said: 'The fate of Rangoon may be decided within the next ten days unless reinforcements arrive immediately.' 46 Indian Brigade had landed four days earlier, but was a raw body of men and its transport did not come with it. 48 Indian Brigade was due, but not for ten days.

<sup>1</sup>He had to stay there until after the evacuation of Burma in May 1945. He was then invited to return to duty and joined the exiled government at Simla where he remained throughout the war and increased his reputation as an able civil servant.

<sup>2</sup>More a name than a fact. Besides 2 Burma Brigade and 16 Indian Brigade, transferred to it from 1 Burma Division, the division had no troops. The two other brigades due to form it had not yet joined.

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There were no other reinforcements immediately in sight, except 18 British Division of which nothing had been heard since Churchill's wire of 13 December. The four brigades, even had they been in position in the Moulmein sector, would still have been inferior to the Japanese invaders, as they had no air and very little artillery. Moreover, it was possible that the Japanese had another division behind the one already observed. Their main invasion thrust if this was it, was hardly likely to be composed of only one division.

Hutton had a further reason for anxiety. His communications with the Moulmein front were very bad. Moulmein town lay on the further side of the Salween, one of the largest rivers in the world and here about a mile and a half broad. It was unbridged and the ferry service was poor. For an inferior army to join battle with its back to a river is cited from classical times as an example of how not to fight. On the near side of the river was Martaban, a rail and road terminus. A single track narrow gauge railway led to Rangoon via Pegu, a total distance of about one hundred and sixty miles. There was a gap, however, in the road of about seventy miles between Thaton and Pegu. This section was now being hurriedly built, but was not finished. At about the eightieth mile from Moulmein there was a bottle-neck. The road and railway crossed the Sittang, a large river five hundred yards broad. A retreating army closely pursued trying to cross a single bridge is again one of those textbook situations which give an enemy a maximum advantage. The Sittang was Rangoon's last natural barrier. The proper place to defend it was on the west bank. The troops would have to be got across the bridge in good time. But at the moment Hutton did not contemplate a withdrawal from the frontier. He would first stand at Moulmein. If driven over the Salween, he would stand on the west bank of that river, a natural obstacle far stronger than the Sittang. That would give time for 48 Indian Brigade to arrive, a good brigade of Gurkhas, and for 46 Brigade to move up from Rangoon; time for the Chinese to take over the Shan States front, now at last seen not to be the invasion's point; time to bring down from there 1 Burma Division, which consisted of two brigades with oddments, and con-

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centrate them west of the Sittang; time even for further reinforcements to arrive, 18 British Division perhaps, which he still believed might come, for the news of its diversion had not been communicated to him. Even so, he was obliged to warn Dorman-Smith, ten days might see the fate of Rangoon decided. That was the assumption which should guide all civil measures.

That night Dorman-Smith wired Amery telling him of the forecast, asking about 18 British Division, and outlining plans. He was arranging for currency to be made available in Upper Burma should the Government have to leave Rangoon. Fogarty was to try and smooth the way in the Shan States for the immediate arrival of the Chinese divisions. Lend-lease munitions would be got out of the docks and up country. Demolition explosives, especially for the great Syriam refinery, must be quickly put in place. He ended by begging again for reinforcements and declared: 'I need hardly say that I will keep the Government here as long as possible and that I myself have no intention of leaving Rangoon.'

The next morning he addressed himself to the major problem of the evacuation. The time had come to send the secretariat and the departments to places outside the battle zone, so that the Government might continue to function.<sup>1</sup> As Mandalay and Maymyo had not the houses to accommodate so many people, they must be dispersed in several towns. To shift the central offices of the country's administration in a few days involved a hurried packing of records, finding transport, seeing that adequate food was available in the towns chosen, drafting new regulations, appointing special officials, and the solution of such problems as where convicts were to go to, where hospital patients, more difficult still, where lunatics. But important though it was to ensure that the loss of the capital did not mean the end of civil government, it was no less so to help the general public to

<sup>1</sup>The point here is that if the Japanese reached the line of the Sittang they would be within a few miles of the Rangoon-Mandalay road and railway, the main line of communication with Upper Burma. That cut, evacuation would be much more difficult. It was essential to start getting out of Rangoon at once.

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get away. If they did not go in time but postponed it to the last moment, there would be disorder and panic. A mob of refugees would block the roads. It would be impossible to care for and feed them. And they would impede military operation. So Indians now were pressed to go home, by sea if they could get passages, otherwise on foot. More food and water and medical supplies had to be dumped on the road over the Taungup pass. More police, doctors, anti-cholera serums, wells, rice, flour, salt, bullocks, drivers, ferry boats, shelters, all had to be quickly made ready to be sent there.

At the same time—and this was the greatest puzzle—enough dock labour had to remain to unload the ships bringing reinforcements and stores; the conservancy must be maintained; essential personnel of the railways, telegraphs, hospitals must stay; and there must also still be food in the capital. For Rangoon might not fall for some time. The hoped-for reinforcements might come. The troops on the frontier might hold the invasion. Or there might be a siege. Or a long drawn-out struggle. To prepare against so many eventualities seemed impossible but must be attempted. A solution of the dock labour problem was found, however. A Labour Corps, Chinese or from India. That would mean a body of men under military discipline. It was, in fact, by this means that essential work in the port was carried on till the last minute.

On 25 January Wavell arrived, having flown all night from Java two thousand miles away. He came to see if Hutton was right in thinking Rangoon was so seriously threatened. In his despatch he wrote afterwards: 'I spent the 25th at Rangoon and returned during the night. I found the situation better than I expected . . . and did not consider it immediately serious provided the reinforcement of Burma with land and air forces proceeded without delay.' As always his presence was a tonic. He issued an encouraging Order of the Day. Like everyone else, Dorman-Smith was much cheered and wired that night to Amery that after seeing Wavell he couldn't believe the worst would happen.

Six days later (31 January) an event occurred which, though at the time it did not seem to decide Rangoon's fate, in fact did so.

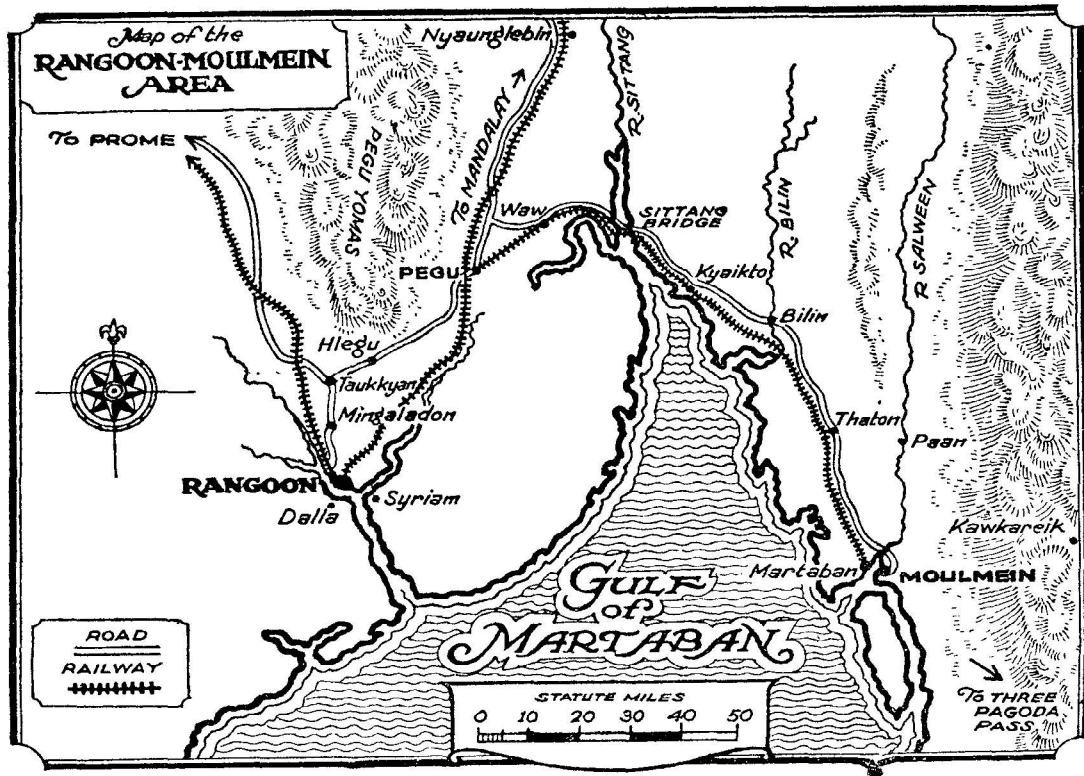
## CHAPTER X

### *The Fall of Moulmein*

**I**n the last chapter we have seen how on 22 January Hutton gave his ten-day warning and how on 25 January Wavell declared the danger less immediate than that. In his despatch Wavell wrote afterwards: 'I was certainly guilty of an error of judgment in minimising the danger to Burma, but it is doubtful whether, if I had appreciated it thoroughly I could have done much more to help Burma.' There were no troops, equipment or planes to send. That is true enough; because he differed from Hutton he did not neglect to take any action which he would have taken had he agreed with him. Nevertheless, when a Commander-in-Chief minimises danger, he aggravates it by inspiring false confidence. In the present case, however, the danger was so immediate that the degree of confidence Wavell inspired had no time to harm before it was shown to be misplaced.

How Wavell could have underestimated the danger is difficult to understand. He had been informed that a Japanese division was poised on the frontier, a division presumably as well trained and as well armed as the divisions which were driving the considerable British forces under his command down the Malay peninsula and were about to cross the Strait onto Singapore island. There were only two brigades between it and the Salween; if it crossed the river it was in the approaches to metropolitan Burma. One of the brigades had *already* been routed. The reader is reminded that Hutton to strengthen 2 Burma Brigade, which up to this had been the sole military force in the whole of Tenasserim, had sent from Mandalay 16 Indian Brigade and that by 14 January it was in position on the Kawkareik pass. It was attacked on 20 January

Map of the  
**RANGOON-MOULMEIN**  
AREA



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by advance parties of the Japanese division. On 22 January it was in danger of being overwhelmed but managed to disengage and fall back on Moulmein (sixty miles by air but ninety miles by road). On the way it lost most of its animal transport, its signal equipment, many of its weapons and all its mechanical transport, and arrived at Moulmein on 25 January disorganised and reduced in numbers. It was ferried across the Salween to Martaban and posted along the west bank as far north as Pa-an to hold the line of the river. This was the very day Wavell declared at Rangoon that the situation was not immediately serious. One fails to see how it could have been more serious. There was now only one brigade left (2 Burma Brigade) to face the Japanese division advancing from Kawkareik on Moulmein. By what means could a single brigade of unseasoned troops stop a veteran Japanese division? If, as seemed certain, the Japanese overwhelmed 2 Burma Brigade and crossed the Salween, the only additional British force to oppose them in the area was 46 Indian Brigade, landed in Rangoon on 20 January and now moving into position and the damaged 16th. 48 Indian Brigade had not yet landed.

The situation, however, was even more perilous than supposed. Two Japanese divisions, not one, were on the frontier, the 55th and the 33rd. They were both first class divisions and, though each was a brigade short, they numbered together some fifteen thousand men.

The Headquarters of Major General Smyth, V.C., Commander of 17 Division, the division consisting of the two brigades in the Moulmein sector, the just arrived 46 Brigade and the expected 48 Brigade, had been at Moulmein until just before the events described. On 23 January he moved the H.Q. back to Kyaikto, fifty miles nearer Rangoon, after hearing what happened on the Kawkareik pass. On 25 January, therefore, after 16 Indian Brigade had crossed the river to Martaban, Brigadier Bourke, the commander of 2 Burma Brigade, was left alone to bear the brunt of the Japanese invasion of Burma. His orders were to hold on as long as possible. Had it been only one Japanese division, he could not have held. With two, it was a question whether he would be able to disengage and cross the river.

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If one looks a little more closely at the troops under his command, the weakness of his situation is clearer still. He had three battalions of Burma Rifles, the 3rd, 7th and 8th; a battalion of the Frontier Force Regiment; a Mountain Battery of four 3.7 Howitzers and four Bofors A.A. guns. He had no air, no armour, few machine guns. The total combatant strength was about three thousand men. The Burma Rifles were recruited from the inhabitants of Burma; about six hundred men were Burmans, the rest Indians domiciled in Burma. Besides the three thousand combatants, were two thousand military personnel, the staff of supply depots, the motor transport, hospitals, etc. It had been intended to build up Moulmein as a Divisional Headquarters in anticipation of the lavish reinforcements which had been promised. Hence the large number of personnel. These men, as non-combatants, were only a liability to a brigade with its back to a river and threatened by an overwhelming force. There were also the officers of the civil government, from the Deputy Commissioner, Mr Wallace, downwards. Their help was of great value in many respects, but their safety was an added responsibility. As for the quality of the three battalions of Burma Rifles, Brigadier Bourke writes: 'Few of these men had more than two years' service and many of them only months or weeks.' Such were the troops left to stand up to the powerful machine coming at them.

A small force, if in a strong position, can sometimes resist a larger for a while. Moulmein afforded no such advantage to the defence. With the aerodrome there, the wharves here, and the dumps and depots somewhere else, a perimeter of eight miles was necessary to protect all vital points. Not less than a division could have made so straggling a place into a defensive position.

Bourke has described to me what happened.<sup>1</sup> It was an eerie experience. The Japanese did not come down the road from Kawkareik in a straightforward manner. They broke up into small bodies of heavily armed men who left the road and took to the jungle. This was the novel tactic of infiltration, which was proving so successful in the advance on Singapore and had been a feature

<sup>1</sup>He also placed at my disposal his papers written at the time.



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of the swoop on Tavoy from the mountains. When the Japanese parties entered the jungle they were extremely difficult to locate. Patrols were out everywhere trying to intercept them. But like the rest of the army in Burma the troops in Moulmein had had little or no training in jungle tactics. They could not make contact with the Japanese, who continued to worm their way gradually nearer. A party would be reported to the south or east. An attempt would be made to come to grips with it, but it would fade into the jungle, presently to spring an ambush or emerge in the rear. From 26 to 29 January the Japanese methodically infiltrated into the Moulmein area, hidden among the numerous jungle paths. That they were getting nearer was known from the reports of villagers, from occasional brushes with them, and from glimpses of them where the jungle gave place to open rice cultivation. But no prisoners were taken and their numbers and point of attack remained uncertain. It was abominably difficult to guess what exactly was happening. An attack of some sort was evidently developing, but it remained in doubt where the main thrust would come. So the Japanese came on, as elusive as spectres, their many parties mysteriously in touch with one another and weaving an invisible web round the town.

All doubts of their intentions were dispelled on the early morning of 30 January when a very heavy attack was made on the perimeter defences from the south and south-east.<sup>1</sup> They were revealed in considerably greater numbers than was at first estimated. The battle had begun. Bourke had moved his headquarters at 8 a.m. to the ridge which lies between the streets along the bank of the Salween and the more open country to the east and affords a good view in all directions. At 9.30 the Japanese began shelling the ridge and also launched another attack further east. Both attacks were held and at noon all fighting died down. The Japanese were evidently waiting for more of their forces to come up.

During this lull, which lasted till 4 p.m., a curious thing happened. Brigadier Ekin suddenly appeared in Moulmein. He

<sup>1</sup>The 33rd Japanese Division attacked Moulmein, while the 55th Division came round the flank to the north.

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was commander of 46 Brigade, and had come from Kyaikto where his brigade was assembling. He had been sent by Smyth, under orders from Hutton, to take general charge of operations in Moulmein, as it was feared that Bourke could not handle the situation alone. It was unfortunate that Ekin should arrive in the middle of the battle. Bourke had the situation well in hand and it could be of no conceivable advantage to him or to his troops for the command to be changed at so critical a moment. But in the fog of war such things happen. Ekin, however, seeing how the land lay, though obliged by his orders to assume command, associated Bourke closely with him till the end of the action. He was a man of charming character and his intervention at so inopportune a moment did no harm.

At 4 p.m. the Japanese renewed the attack. It was decided to shorten the perimeter. The battalions to the eastward were drawn in to form a smaller defensive position anchored on the ridge. The detachment holding the aerodrome, however, failed to get back. As darkness fell at 7 p.m. the battle increased. The Japanese began their infiltration tactics again. They tried to wedge their way in between the battalions on the reduced perimeter. As the night lengthened, Japanese pressure grew. Ekin phoned Smyth at Kyaikto that it might be necessary to abandon the town and retire across the river. Bourke sent one of his officers to keep as many launches as possible ready at the main wharves, while the headquarters moved at 3 a.m. to a position adjacent to a wharf. At 4 a.m. the Bofors battery was overrun and its commander killed. At 6 a.m. after another phone conversation with Smyth it was decided to withdraw over the river, while it was still possible to do so. The troops were holding well and there was no panic. But it was evident that they could not hold much longer with no rest, no time for food, their water supply cut, and without hope of reinforcement. 16 Indian Brigade across the river could not be brought over to help and 46 Indian Brigade was fifty miles off, if indeed it had all reached Kyaikto and part of it was not still on the way there.

At 6.30 a.m. the various units were ordered to close in steadily on the main wharves, 'keeping the box shut' as the military phrase

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went. When this movement was observed, the Japanese attacked violently in an attempt to break the box. The attack was held and the withdrawal to the wharves continued without undue haste. Mr Wallace, the Deputy Commissioner, and his staff of civil officers reached the riverside about this time. The launches manned by civilian crews from Chittagong, stiffened by Sappers and Miners, were waiting. Again and again the Japanese, following the withdrawal, made fierce attempts to break the box but were held every time.

When at last the wharves were reached, the battalions embarked in an orderly manner, though harassed by machine gun fire from neighbouring houses. The crossing began about 9 a.m., a very hazardous passage as the river here is a mile and a half broad. Bourke and Ekin with Brigade Headquarters and other elements, including the Mountain Battery, which managed to save its guns, crossed in a launch with a barge alongside and took about forty minutes to get over. They were shelled from the Ridge, machine gunned from the shore and bombed from the air, but somehow or other were not hit by the heavy missiles. All troops, personnel and civil officers, were evacuated successfully except for a few of the rearguard and some stragglers. Launches were sent back for them, but the Japanese had brought up more guns, and the Indian crews, unable to stand the increased shelling, ran the launches aground and fled.

On reaching Martaban, Ekin departed to rejoin his brigade. So ended the battle of Moulmein, in which 2 Burma Brigade suffered six hundred and nineteen casualties, though some of these were missing who afterwards rejoined. These losses were small compared to the disaster which overtook 17 Division three weeks later at a similar river crossing, when the command failed to extricate it with the address shown by the command at Moulmein.

The battle of Moulmein was like the raising of a curtain; it revealed what hitherto had only been surmised about the Japanese. Moreover, the nakedness of the defence of Burma was suddenly manifest. Two Japanese divisions were on the Salween. On its west bank were two British brigades. Sixty miles back was 46 Brigade; and 48 Brigade, landed on 31 January, would be with

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it in a few days. Twenty miles behind them was the broad and deep Sittang, with its bottleneck of a single bridge; to the west of it was the metropolitan plain. Here Hutton hoped to have the two brigades of 1 Burma Division from the Shan States after the Chinese relieved them. From there Rangoon was only fifty miles away and was undefended by any reserve. It was evident that between the Japanese and the capital were insufficient forces to protect it. The only chance, as Hutton had noted, was the arrival of sufficient reinforcements. But if they could be found, could they arrive in time? It had grown very late. The Japanese might take a month to cover the hundred and fifty miles to Rangoon. It was of course legitimate to hope that, if the brigades fought a slow delaying action, help might reach Burma within a month. But it was a slender hope, both that the brigades could so fight and that enough help would really come. The probability was that Rangoon's fall was inevitable. Events were to prove the probability a fact.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted here that two views prevailed in military circles as to the proper strategy to be adopted. The slow fighting withdrawal was the choice of the higher command. Smyth, however, who took over 17 Division on 9 January, thought that his troops were too far forward and dangerously spread out. He favoured a rapid withdrawal to the west bank of the Sittang at the point where it was crossed by its only bridge. This was a strong position. His troops concentrated there would be well placed to meet the Japanese army. But his advice to that effect was not accepted. Political considerations pressed on the C.-in-C. The abandonment without fighting of the large slice of Burma between the Salween and the Sittang might shake morale and cause panic in Rangoon and throughout Burma. For this reason and for reasons of world prestige at a moment when the British were suffering heavy defeats in Malaya and elsewhere, the Chiefs of Staff expected Wavell to stand and fight.



5. Lt-General Hutton



*'Topical' Press Agency photograph*

6. General Alexander

## CHAPTER XI

### *The Disaster of the Sittang Bridge*

It has been said of the great tragedies that their essence is the inevitability with which they unfold. The massive approach of the Japanese, the fall of Moulmein, when considered in the wide perspective of the World War, had this kind of fateful progression. But was it, in fact a tragedy which was taking shape? The British were hardly tragic protagonists; their role was wanting in dignity and pathos for their misfortunes to move in a classical sense. They had no business to be in Burma; or rather they were in Burma for business. They had deported the Burmese king in 1885 for business reasons. He threatened to do business with the French instead of with them, and had to go. That the Japanese were in turn putting them out of business was not properly a tragic theme. I have heard it argued that the British were in Burma for humanitarian reasons; they wanted to do good to the Burmese. Even so, I do not think that the end of a humanitarian endeavour is a tragic theme. The Burmese had had enough of being done good to. More bluntly it has been said that the British were in Burma for glory. If so, they had had their fill of glory and its discontinuance was unlikely to move the world to tears. Finally, it has been urged that, allowing the British went to Burma for business and glory, they changed with the times and were only staying on because they had a duty to the Burmese to protect them. The invasion of Burma, however, was proof that they could not protect them.

Rather, what was unfolding was a Burmese tragedy. The Burmese were the real sufferers. Their country was to be smashed up, every town burnt and levelled, every railway destroyed,

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every amenity ended, life narrowed to a rustic round, the population impoverished and cut off from the outer world.

Dorman-Smith rightly felt that this was the tragedy, not the other. I do not wish to suggest that, as a British Governor, he did not feel the humiliation of being impotent to prevent the loss of a British possession. But it was British impotence to protect the Burmese that moved him most. He saw them as unfortunates entangled in a vast contest for world power, with the origins of which they had nothing to do. Two monstrous powers were fighting it out on their territory. They were like innocents strayed into a giant's battle.<sup>1</sup>

It is only natural to suppose that the Burmese heartily wished that the two monsters could do their fighting elsewhere. That one had attacked the other in their country, so remote from either, was a piece of bad luck. As subjects of the attacked monster they had to fight for him. But if only the pair of them could have torn themselves to pieces in some air or sea out of sight and earshot! As it was, the monster, their master, with a selfishness that was only matched by its stupidity, expected them to give their lives and property to help preserve his dominion. Dorman-Smith knew well, to change the metaphor, that the Burmese were a pawn in a vast game of chess. But he was obliged in practice to ignore this and assume that, though a subject nation, they ought to be, and were, as much convinced that they were fighting to preserve their freedom, as were the free nations of Europe.

Some Burmese, like Sir Paw Tun, the Premier, were sure that the ultimate freedom of Burma depended on an allied victory, and that in serving that cause to the utmost, they were advancing their own country's interest to the utmost. The allies were suffering for the great cause; Burma too must suffer. If she suffered more than the others, that would be her glory; the more she suffered, the greater the certainty of her reward. But this idealism, a true Buddhist idealism, was mostly for those who understood something of contemporary history and the modern trend of British opinion. Yet it would be an error to think that such

<sup>1</sup>There is a Burmese proverb: 'When bison fight the grasses are trampled down.'



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idealists were few; there were many of them. And what they lacked in authentic information they made up for in trust.

To apprehend the meaning of the Japanese invasion of Burma and perceive wherein lay the tragedy, if tragedy there was and it was not a tragi-comedy (or a dramatic story which ended happily with British face restored and the Burmese granted liberty), one has to try and bear in mind these many conflicting aspirations, duties, fears, which drove government, people, army. The leaders of the army were not expected to think beyond the military problem. Enough if they could worst the enemy or, in default, withdraw their troops to fight another day. They need not bother about the Burmese. They could take short cuts in thought and call them what they liked, loyalists or traitors. No need for them to probe further. They were specialists in the job of war. Provided they got on with it, the rest did not matter. But the Governor had to keep all sides in his mind. It was not enough for him to do his best for the army; he had also to do his best for the people. In the face of advancing fate he must so conduct himself that afterwards it would be said of him that, like the captain of a sinking ship, he thought first of those in his charge. To rise to such an occasion and set an example, he must hide despair, show an even mind, and above all preserve his humanity. But what a role to have suddenly to play! The Japanese were on the river. They would be over the river. As their legions drew near, how maintain equanimity in the face of doubt and panic and desertion and treachery and hate and murder and fire and blood? He must strive to find a composure. And bear the ordeal. The role was there and there was no escape from it.

The news that Moulmein had fallen was softened by the arrival in Rangoon that same day of 48 Indian Brigade, a brigade of famous Gurkha regiments, but without its mule transport. It left to join 17 Indian Division in the Kyaikto area on 3 February. But the stimulating effect of this reinforcement soon wore off, since it was so wretchedly inadequate to meet the crisis. On the evening of its departure Dorman-Smith wired to Amery: 'Feeling is rather intense wondering whether soldiers will stop Japs.' And he adds that the enemy was already infiltrating across the Sal-

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ween. Next day he wired: 'Morale has definitely deteriorated especially among Indian community. Servants are now wanting to leave.'<sup>1</sup>

As there was no sign as yet of the Chinese troops which Chiang Kai-Shek had promised to Wavell on 24 December 1941, Hutton set out to see him on 2 February to urge their immediate despatch. His plane crashed near the Burmese frontier, but he escaped injury and saw Chiang Kai-Shek at Lashio. The Generalissimo was cordial and promised to send at once the Fifth Army to Toungoo in central Burma and the Sixth to the Shan States border, both to be under Hutton's command. Dorman-Smith wired Amery on 5 February that 'the meeting was a great success'. But the Generalissimo's manner was misleading. The Fifth Army did not start moving for nearly a month. The delay was largely due to the incompetence of the Chinese Staff. Chiang Kai-Shek was an awkward man to have to deal with. After seeing Hutton he flew to India ostensibly to encourage the Indians to take a strong line against Japan. He embarrassed the Viceroy, however, by suggesting himself as an arbiter between Gandhi and the British Government, and Churchill had to write and beg him not to meddle in the internal affairs of India.

On 5 February Wavell again flew the two thousand miles from Java to Rangoon. Disturbed by the fall of Moulmein, which, as we have seen, he did not anticipate, he came hurrying to find out what he could do. As usual his mere presence gave everyone confidence. Dorman-Smith wired home that he was 'worth a guinea a minute'. The next day he went down to Martaban to see the troops there. 'All commanders expressed themselves to me as confident of their ability to deal with the Japanese advance,' he notes in his despatch. Smyth and his Brigadiers could hardly have said otherwise when their opinions were asked by the Supreme

<sup>1</sup>Fear of bombing had started the Indians on their trek to India. Bombing in Rangoon had ceased, but now the Indians were assailed by the fear of what might happen to them if law and order broke down consequent upon the departure of the Government. They were not afraid of the Burmese in general but of the criminal population. Unrestrained by the police and the courts, Burmese criminals would attack them. Most servants were Indian.

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Commander, his style as C.-in-C. of South West Pacific. Stimulated by the tonic of his wonderful presence they may even have half believed what they said at the moment, though Hutton confirms in his despatch (paragraph 81) that Smyth had already advised withdrawing from Martaban and concentrating his brigades further back between the Bilin and the Sittang. However, Wavell had something available more solid than magic. 7 Armoured Brigade was on its way from the Middle East to Singapore. By this time the British forces in Malaya had been driven across the strait into Singapore island. 'As the Armoured Brigade was of no use there,' Wavell wrote in his despatch, 'I ordered it to be diverted to Rangoon.' It was to arrive on 21 February, too late to save 17 Division at the Sittang, but without which the British forces could not have reached India.

In his wire of 5 February Dorman-Smith refers to the lawlessness behind the Japanese advance. The civil administration having ceased to exist in Tenasserim, robbers were out on the roads. Indians fleeing from Tavoy were very roughly handled by Burmese gangs. The news of this, spread in Rangoon by refugees, made the remaining Indians there the more resolved to be gone. The tempo of the exodus increased. Now that the problem of dock labour had been solved by the creation of a labour corps, part Indian and part Chinese, there was no vital objection to the exodus. It meant, however, that day by day, as Rangoon emptied, there were less shops, less transport, less food brought in, less public services in general. The city was dying. It also meant that the refugees going home by the Taungup pass were now so many that to look after them on a month's journey became almost impossible.

On 7 February Dorman-Smith was wiring: 'Many deputations today asking for assurance regarding evacuation. Even the Commissioner of Police has doubts about his men (Indians) unless they can be assured of getting away before the soldiers leave. There is no good disguising the fact that confidence in army either to defeat enemy or safeguard civilian population is lacking.'

The evacuation of the Government departments to Upper Burma had been proceeding steadily. Sir John Wise, the Governor's Counsellor, had been sent ahead to Maymyo to organise a

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headquarters there. A good number of European women had also been sent off. These moves not unnaturally gave rise to rumours that the Governor himself would soon be leaving, that the soldiers would take over the administration and that they in turn would withdraw to Upper Burma and yield the city to the Japanese. While the general public had been encouraged to leave, men who were doing essential work were told that it was their duty to remain at their posts until given permission to go. These men now asked for a guarantee that they would not be abandoned in the event of the Government and the army's withdrawal. To restore confidence Dorman-Smith made a broadcast on 8 February, in which he denied having any intention of leaving Rangoon, which he declared would be resolutely held. As for essential workers, they need not worry; they 'would not just be left to their fate'. He had, in fact, already made arrangements that if the worst seemed about to happen, warnings would be issued by army headquarters, the first giving the public seventy-two hours to prepare to go and a second telling them to go at once. Most workers would go then. Only a few of the most essential would have to stay, along with volunteers for the demolitions, which would be carried out after a third warning, to be given when the enemy were at the very gates. A steamer would wait for these last ditchers and take them off.

The broadcast restored a degree of confidence. In reporting it to Amery, Dorman-Smith remarked how odd it was that he should have had to assure people he wouldn't bolt and leave them in the lurch.

After the fall of Moulmein on 31 January there had been a lull, while the Japanese brought up more of their two divisions. Smyth's orders, as explained, were first to hold them on the Salween and then fight a delaying action as he fell back towards the Sittang. The longer it could be spun out, the more time for reinforcements to land. Before the end of the first week of February, however, the Japanese were infiltrating over the Salween in strong parties. The withdrawal from the river began on 9 February and Thaton was reached on 14 February. The Division was badly mauled *en route*. Smyth reported that 'while he still had 48 Indian

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Brigade intact and in hand, in 16 and 46 Indian Brigades there was only one battalion, the King's Own Yorkshire Light Infantry, in a fit state to fight.<sup>1</sup> He again advised an immediate withdrawal behind the strong obstacle of the Sittang, but was ordered to stand on the Bilin river, 25 miles short of it.

The abandonment of the Salween and the retreat to the Bilin greatly increased alarm in Rangoon, coming, as they did, on top of the news that Singapore had fallen on 15 February. The capitulation of a British army of seventy thousand men seemed an incredible thing. If seventy thousand had to surrender in Singapore, what chance had the few brigades in Burma? Churchill, sitting at the centre of the world struggle, had to encourage his teams, now here, now there. He divined it to be a moment when Burma and its Governor were in urgent need of a heartening word. So on 16 February he wired to Dorman-Smith: 'I have not hitherto troubled you with a message, but I want to tell you how much I and my colleagues have admired your firm, robust attitude under conditions of increasing difficulty and danger. Now that Singapore has fallen more weight will assuredly be put into the attack on you. Substantial reinforcements, including the Armoured Brigade and two additional squadrons of Hurricanes, should reach you soon. We are meeting tonight to discuss further possibilities. I regard Burma and contact with China as the most important feature of the whole Eastern theatre of war. All good wishes.'

To know that you were not forgotten, that Churchill understood your danger, that he thought well of you and was taking immediate counsel how to help you, was a wonderful tonic.

<sup>1</sup>Para. 88 of General Hutton's Despatch. The other brigade, 2 Burma Brigade, had been sent earlier by train to Kyaikto to refit and was not in this withdrawal. On 16 February it was ordered to the area between Pegu and Toungoo and so escaped the Sittang disaster of 23 February. Though 2 Burma Brigade at the time of the battle of Moulmein was part of 17 Indian Division, it really belonged, as explained, to 1 Burma Division, the troops hitherto placed to guard the eastern frontier of the Shan States. Now, by going to the area between Pegu and Toungoo, it was rejoining 1 Burma Division, which on relief by the Chinese 6th Army was to move to that area conjointly with the Chinese 5th Army.

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Burma, which hitherto had been at the bottom of the priority list, had suddenly been moved to the top. But what a pity this had not happened a bit sooner! Had it been admitted that Singapore was indefensible without air and sea power and that pouring in ground troops alone was useless, Burma would have got 18 British Division, now every man of them prisoners of war. But no good regretting that. Perhaps another division would be found among those passing to and fro on the seas.

The appreciation, however, given by Hutton at the Defence Council on 11 February, had been that 'nothing short of six divisions in addition to Chinese help will save Burma in the present situation', an estimate wired to Amery that night. Such was the truth. To send less would be to send too many, for less would not suffice to win and would provide more to lose, if it came to a capitulation as at Singapore. Yet it was only human nature to take what you could get. The Armoured Brigade was coming. It might achieve a miracle.

Before I describe the disaster which overtook 17 Division on 23 February at the Sittang bridge, twenty-five miles west of the Bilin, let us watch the tension rising in Rangoon as disclosed in Dorman-Smith's nightly wires to Amery. The wires were sometimes long and they had to be coded. His two daughters were helping to do the job. At midnight in Burma it was 6 p.m. in London and so a wire sent before midnight could be attended to before London went to bed and a reply reach Rangoon by breakfast. Hurriedly written in the heat of events, the wires reveal how nerves were on edge. The war correspondents of the London newspapers, for instance, seemed intolerably irritating in their frantic search for sensation. A scoop seemed their sole ambition and anything that interfered with it, even public convenience or common prudence, was regarded as a deliberate attempt against the sacred freedom of the Press. The criticism in the London newspapers was also hard to bear when one knew so much more than a reporter ever could. But such worries were a small matter, when every day the news was graver; or went maddeningly up and down. By the middle of February, it was estimated, the population of Rangoon had fallen from 400,000 to 150,000. With

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nearly two-thirds of the city gone, it was ceasing to be a workable proposition. On 14 February we find it stated that cholera, the most dreaded of all Oriental diseases, had broken out among the refugees, and that the Chinese Fifth Army, promised by Chiang Kai-Shek and urgently needed, had not even begun to march towards Burma. On 15 February apprehension was expressed that 17 Indian Division's position on the Bilin river was precarious, as indeed it was, and more precarious than supposed, because it was not yet known that the 33rd Japanese Division was marching on its flank. On the following day the big business people called and said they would like to be sure of getting enough notice, if the city were to be evacuated, as they didn't want to be left behind in the rush. 17 February was one of the up days. For no reason everyone felt confident. Hutton was reported to be quite optimistic. But more Indians fled the city than usual. The fog of war was absolute. Battle had been joined in the Bilin area, but no one had the slightest idea of what would happen. Next morning the American Consul General was in such a hurry to get away that he could not wait to say goodbye at Government House. London wired to know if a change of Generals would do any good. Dorman-Smith wired back that the existing ones were all right.

So far the tension had been up and down. From now on all was black. Late on 18 February Dorman-Smith wired the news of the Bilin battle: 'My bulletin tonight is not a very happy one. I have seen Hutton and Stevenson. Hutton tells me that we have no more than a fifty per cent. chance of holding Rangoon. We have had considerable casualties and our troops are weary. Japs seem to have brought up fresh troops. We have no reserves to throw into the battle.' Smyth was being outflanked on the Bilin. On 19 February Hutton ordered him to fall back towards the Sittang bridge, twenty-five miles west, and get over it without delay.

Stevenson, the Air Officer Commanding, also had depressing news on the 18th. The approach of the Japanese to the Sittang had overrun his warning system (the Burmese in the trees in Tenasserim and nearer) and Rangoon airport was becoming un-

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safe; his whole force might be destroyed there on the ground in default of enough warning to get into the air. He would have to move somewhere else. The best course would be for his base to be India. He could maintain a forward Wing at Magwe, in Upper Burma, as warning was still practicable up there. This meant that Rangoon would be left without any fighter protection. It was a further indication that the city could not be held.

On top of this Dorman-Smith had to report that the banks had closed their doors, as their employees had fled.<sup>1</sup> 'Morale today has necessarily deteriorated.' And ends his wire: 'Anyway we will fight.'

Next day the news is worse. 'Hutton and Stevenson came to see me this morning and reported that the position is more than serious. Smyth is withdrawing behind the Sittang, but Hutton doubts whether he will be able to hold them even there. Our casualties have been severe. Japanese reinforcements continue to arrive.' The Armoured Brigade had been sighted at sea, but clearly the time had come to issue the first warning and prepare to get away all government employees who could be spared. Any members of the general public who had not already gone should now leave. The few who had cars were to drive away in them or else put them out of action. For the rest trains would be provided as far as possible. On this decision being taken, Hutton gave orders that the first warning, called the E signal, should be issued on the morrow. Dorman-Smith ends his wire on the 19th: 'I will remain in Rangoon until the demolitions have been carried out.' This meant that he intended to be a last ditcher. He was thinking perhaps of the promise in his broadcast. Later on he saw it was impossible to stay in Rangoon beyond a certain date if he were to continue to direct the affairs of the Government.

First thing in the morning of 20 February the E signal was given. The cars left and the special trains, which were packed not only inside but on the roof. People fought for a seat on the buffers. To get into the station at all was a problem, even for those government employees who had reserved seats. It is stated that the subordinates of the Jail Department, waiting their turn

<sup>1</sup>The Government cashed cheques after this.



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and frantic at the delay, broke onto the platform by climbing the railings and entered two coaches which were already full. Just before the train started, they were found to be sitting on top of the passengers, mainly women and children, whom they hid from view and were half smothering. It was with great difficulty that they were dragged out. When the last train had left, a large mob, shouting and miserable, was left behind. But accepting their lot, they set out on foot to walk as far as possible from the doomed city. Lady Dorman-Smith<sup>1</sup> left for Maymyo by car on this day. The following extract from her diary, gives an idea of how distressing it was for the Rangoon Englishwomen suddenly to have to abandon home and possessions and flee northwards. 'Geoffrey Miller (the Military Secretary),' she writes, 'came in after breakfast and said he was sending a lorry up to Maymyo today and I could send a small case in it. While I was packing up photos etc. he burst in about 11.30 and said the E signal was up and that Amy (his wife) and I and various others in No. 1 convoy must be ready to leave after lunch. It all sounded too awful. Got a small trunk full of clothes and a few oddments out of the drawing-room and was ready by lunch. All most depressing. At 3 p.m. we left. Amy and I and Cleo (a dog) in the Rolls and a sergeant of the Gloucesters. Dunkley (the Chief Justice), and three wives of officials in the next car. Two lorries of servants, almost sixty altogether, and No. 3 car with Geoffrey Miller. All packed to the top with luggage etc. Went through Pegu. Very little traffic. Arrived at Toungoo about 10 p.m. Very dirty Circuit House, so went on to the Deputy Commissioner's. He was away, so we settled down in the drawingroom to try and get some sleep. Only a piece of bread and cheese for us to eat, as all the food was in the lorry and the big picnic basket had nothing but plates etc. in it. Geoffrey Miller and the lorries arrived about 11.30. Off in the morning at 7 a.m. No breakfast—just a cup of tea. Driving in a convoy most tiring, as we either went too fast or too slow. Wrecked lorries strewn along the roadside. Got to Meiktila at 2 p.m. and the lorries arrived at 3. Had our first square meal there since we left Rangoon. The Deputy Com-

<sup>1</sup>Her two daughters had left some days earlier.

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missioner, a Burman lad, arranged it all very well. Attractive situation on a large lake. Drove on to Mandalay. Arrived there at 7 p.m. and we were up at Government House (Maymyo) about 9 p.m. Worn out. Geoffrey Miller and the lorries arrived about 1 a.m. . . . No bedding as bed rolls on the lorries, so wrapped ourselves up in coats and rugs. Total mileage about 480. Quite cold at Maymyo and very glad to see a fire.'

An official report gives some idea of what Rangoon was like at this time. 'All the patients in the hospital were evacuated by train to Mandalay on 21 February, the staff following by road on the 22nd. There were also a number of criminal lunatics (in the Asylum). It was not feasible to remove them to Upper Burma and impossible to leave them to starve, and they had to be let out. Similarly, as the Jail Department staff would not, and could not be expected to, stay, and their charges could not be left locked up without attendants and therefore without food, it was decided to release them. There can be no doubt that the addition to the riff-raff of Rangoon of a horde of criminals, lunatic and sane, had a good deal to do with the chaos which supervened.' The order for the release of the convicts was given by the Judicial Secretary, Mr Fielding Hall. His nerve, already frayed by the tension of the last weeks, broke when he heard probably a too sensational account of how they terrorised the streets that night and, blaming himself for having let them out prematurely, though he had no option since the warders had deserted, he committed suicide a few days later. He need not have worried, because Rangoon was in such a state that the thirteen hundred convicts he released were no worse than many other people. The official report continues: 'From the time when the E signal was given, law and order broke down in Rangoon. Nearly all the police had evacuated. . . . Looting went on all over the city and its suburbs, in shops and private houses; highway robbery and murder were rife. But the looting and disorder were not confined to released convicts and local hooligans. An observer who visited the wharves on the night of 21 February writes as follows: "The docks during the night were in a state which it was hardly believable could have existed in any British possession. Apart

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from our small party I do not think there was one single sober man anywhere. The crews of the boats alongside and the troops had looted cases of liquor and were rolling about the place in the last stages of drunkenness. . . . We interviewed several ships' officers, who were quite powerless to take any action, as there were no forces of law and order to assist them." A curfew was imposed and orders were issued to military patrols and such police as still remained to shoot looters at sight. Many looters were shot but it is feared that some of those shot at night were unfortunate lunatics who, released from the asylum, were wandering about the streets looking for food and shelter.' Since the city was nearly empty and the houses deserted, it was a wonderful chance for the town ruffians to make hay. They worked in gangs and one of their tricks was to start a great fire in one quarter to attract attention there and then move to another and loot it at their leisure.

Dorman-Smith remained at Government House with a skeleton staff and a Karen bodyguard. The building, a large and hideous one, stood in extensive grounds two miles from the docks. On 21 February the Armoured Brigade arrived. The men themselves unloaded the tanks, the first vehicles of their kind ever seen in Burma, though there was no one in the streets to watch them go by.

On the 22nd the wire to London was: 'Military appreciation tonight seems to be that in spite of arrival of Armoured Brigade situation may deteriorate very quickly.' The deterioration was even more rapid than expected, for at dawn next day the army on the Sittang met with disaster.

What happened can be shortly told. As explained, on 18 February Smyth was standing on the Bilin with his division of three brigades, numbering about 7,000 men. The Japanese attacked and turned the left flank. On the 19th Hutton visited the division and, finding that the right flank was also in danger of being turned, agreed to Smyth falling back on the Sittang bridge, twenty-five miles to the rear. He records that 'the troops were becoming very weak and exhausted'. On the 20th the division managed to disengage and began to withdraw via Kyaikto to-

## *The Disaster of the Sittang Bridge*

wards the bridge, with the object of crossing it and taking up a position on the west side. The river was a very good obstacle to the pursuit, as it was five hundred yards in breadth and had a swift tide, with as much as a forty foot rise at springs. The bridge would be blown when the division was safely over. It ought to be possible to hold the Japanese on the Sittang until the Armoured Brigade came up.

I mentioned further back that the main road, the only road in this region, had a gap in it hereabouts, though efforts were being made to close it. The work was not finished and the approach to the bridge for sixteen miles was only a rough track through low jungle, so thick with dust that marching troops were enveloped in a cloud.

On the 21st the withdrawal towards the bridge continued. The long line of troops and transport afforded a good target for the Japanese planes. They suffered their worst damage, however, from the R.A.F., which was operating in support, but heavily bombed and machine-gunned them by mistake. These air attacks and the bad road slowed up the march, which was also made arduous by dust and heat. That evening the leading brigade bivouacked some five miles short of the bridge and the others at intervals further back. Safety seemed in sight. The enemy had apparently been shaken off and it looked as if the division would get across the river next day.

The enemy, however, had not been shaken off. It afterwards transpired that what had happened was this: When Smyth's left flank was turned on the Bilin, the 33rd Japanese Division, which had been carrying out a wide outflanking manoeuvre since the crossing of the Salween, made straight for the Sittang bridge by jungle tracks, in order to seize it while still intact, and then intercept 17 Division as it came up. In the event it failed to seize the bridge, but arrived soon after dawn on 22 February when the British forces were crossing the bridge. The result of this was that Smyth, instead of being sufficiently ahead to cross the river unmolested, had to fight a battle on the east side, under very adverse conditions.

In the dark before dawn of the 22nd 17 Division's transport

## *The Disaster of the Sittang Bridge*

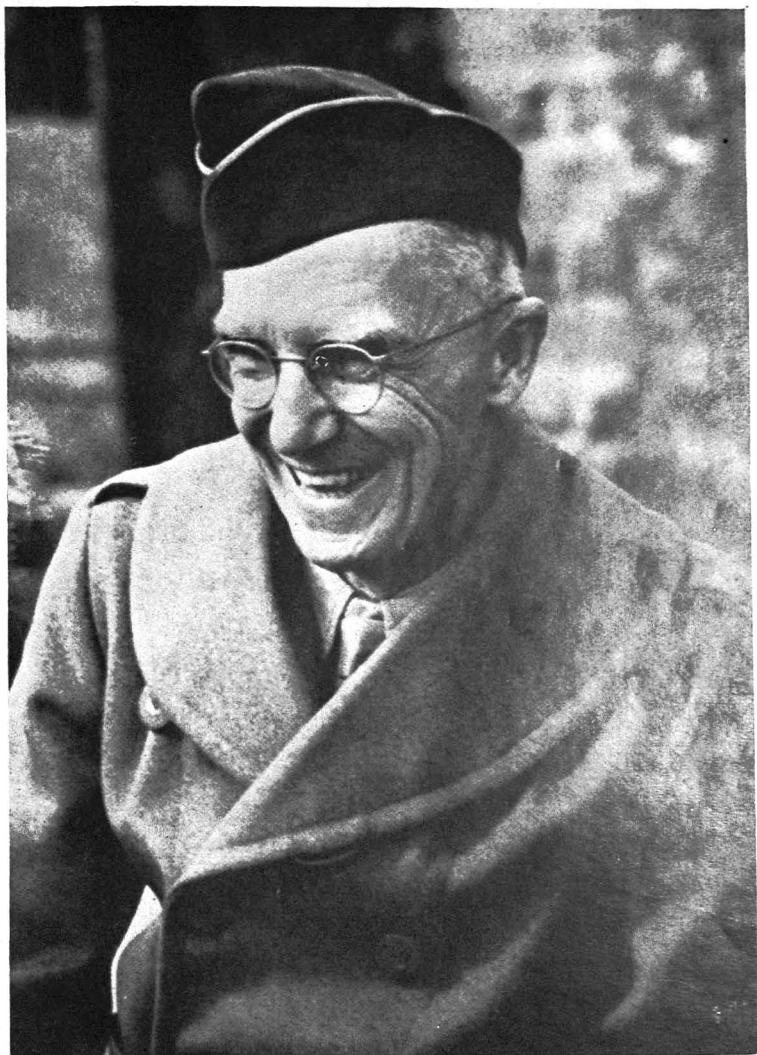
began to cross the bridge, lights switched off. At 4 a.m. a lorry slipped off the planking which had been laid over the railway lines (for there was no separate roadway over the bridge) and could not be moved. The bridge was blocked for 2½ hours and all traffic came to a standstill, the queue of vehicles and troops stretching back six miles. Not till 6.30 a.m. was the long column moving again. Divisional Headquarters, 48 Brigade Headquarters and part of 48 Brigade crossed. Then at 8.30 a.m. the van of the 33rd Japanese Division made its attack. Their first rush almost gave them the bridgehead. The part of 48 Brigade which had not yet crossed succeeded in stopping the onslaught and, by occupying two hills, Pagoda Hill and Buddha Hill, close to the bridgehead, managed to retain it in their possession. The two brigades behind, however, 16 and 46, strung out in a long column, were thrown into disorder by attacks on their flank and by a road block which cut them off from 48 Brigade. During the whole of the 22nd fierce fighting went on in an area a mile or two east of the bridgehead. In the course of a confused struggle Ekin with half 46 Brigade got lost in the jungle. When dark fell, 48 Brigade still held the bridgehead, but the other two brigades had failed to reach it. They remained cut off about a mile away.

The reports which came in during the night of 22-23 February were alarming and made it appear that the brigades were so beset and disorganised that they were in grave danger of being overrun. It looked as if the Japanese might at any moment take the bridge. There would then be nothing between them and Rangoon. A few forced marches and the capital would be theirs. Such a *coup de main* would be decisive. A rumour that a party of the enemy had crossed the river higher up and were making for the west end of the bridge, where the detonators were in position, convinced the harassed Brigadiers on the spot that there was no alternative to blowing the bridge, though it meant leaving ten battalions out of twelve on the wrong side. Brigadier Hugh-Jones of the 48th rang up Divisional Headquarters at Waw (ten miles west) at 4.30 a.m. and informed Smyth that the bridge could not be held any longer. Smyth accepted this estimate of the situation and ordered it to be blown, which was done at 5.30 a.m.

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Whether the destruction of the bridge was premature has been warmly debated ever since. The battalions on the east side, though still precariously holding the bridgehead at 5.30 a.m. 23 February, were certainly in a most perilous situation. The two Japanese divisions could hardly have failed to overwhelm and capture them in the course of the morning. That they could have disengaged sufficiently to cross and destroy the bridge is hard to conceive. What actually happened after the explosion is curious and does not seem hitherto to have been made comprehensible. 3,300 men succeeded during the day in crossing the river by swimming, on rafts, and with the help of ropes, though all artillery, transport and equipment, except 1,400 rifles, had to be abandoned. But if to cross with the bridge was impossible, how was the far more difficult feat of crossing without it accomplished? It appears that the Japanese, on the bridge being blown, broke off the battle and turned northwards to seek a crossing upstream. Their orders were to get to Rangoon with all speed. Thus, paradoxically, the blowing of the bridge seems to have saved the troops on the east bank from being made prisoners, as well as preventing, as was intended, the immediate advance of the Japanese on Rangoon.

Such was the Sittang disaster. It would not have occurred in that form if 17 Division had been moved back sooner. There were, as explained, two views on the advisability of this. The higher command thought a slow fighting withdrawal, disputing the passage of the Salween and the Bilin, was the right course for the reasons already given. Smyth's view was that a rapid withdrawal to the west bank of the Sittang and a stand on that strong position, his troops concentrated and rested, would give better results. But who can say what the result of a pitched battle on the Sittang would have been? A disaster of some kind was probably inevitable, because no commander could have saved Burma with the few troops which at that moment of the war were all that could be spared.



7. General Stilwell



*London News Agency photograph*

8a. Moat, bridge, gateway and wall of the Palace City of Mandalay



*Paul Popper photograph*

8b. A typical Buddhist Monastery (at Lashio)



## CHAPTER XII

### *Last days in Rangoon*

**T**he bad news from the Sittang would have been stunning for Rangoon had not good news been received simultaneously. Burma was to be reinforced, really reinforced this time, not by a mere brigade but by a division, a splendid division of veteran troops. The fall of Singapore and the rapid advance of the Japanese over the Salween towards the port and entry of the only road to China had caused London to see Burma in a wider strategic perspective. From being a British possession, to be defended certainly, but which might have to be let go as a forfeit, she had become of world concern. Churchill now seriously bestirred himself to save her. In the chapter<sup>1</sup> of his *The Second World War* where he publishes his telegraphic correspondence with Mr Curtin, the Premier of Australia, he tells the story of what he tried to do. It happened that on 20 February, two days before the battle on the Sittang, a first class Australian division, on its way home from service in the Middle East, was rounding the southern point of Ceylon. Mr Curtin was asked that day for permission to divert it to Burma. It could be landed on the 26th or 27th and would be in time, said Mr Churchill, to prevent the loss of Rangoon and the severance of communication with China. There was nothing else in the world that could fill the gap, he urged. So certain was he of getting a favourable reply that he took the responsibility of sending a signal at once to the division to alter its course and steer for Rangoon.

That the division was coming seems not to have been known to the Government of Burma until 23 February. The next day

<sup>1</sup>Vol. iv, Chap. 9.

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Dorman-Smith wired to Amery: 'If we can get the Australians here we might well effect a radical change for the better. Obviously it will be an anxious business getting them here, but I feel that it is a risk well worth taking as otherwise Burma is wide open for the Japanese.' The first part of the last sentence refers to the Japanese navy's command of the sea, to the absence of air cover, and also to the state Rangoon was in after the E signal had been given, particularly the want of adequate or suitable provisions. Nevertheless, since the labour corps had not fled and some other essential personnel remained on duty, the division could probably be landed. But as only the Armoured Brigade and the remnant of 17 Indian Division lay between Rangoon and the Japanese, who might make a sudden dash, it was impossible to guarantee that the city would still be in British hands on as late as the 27th, the date when the Australian division was expected. Moreover, since it was essential to blow up the docks to prevent them falling to the Japanese, this might have to be done before the division could arrive.

It seems doubtful whether the division could have been landed. It was actually in three convoys, not one, with an interval of a day's sail or more between each. Its stores, equipment, etc., had not been packed so as to be immediately available for active service. A good deal of sorting out would have been required. A week or more would have been required before it was ready to take the field. Even had these difficulties been overcome, it is uncertain whether one division, arriving so late, would have sufficed. In the estimate made a few weeks back, three or four extra divisions were given as the minimum. Moreover, the Australians were untrained in jungle warfare, the mastery of which, and its novelty, had given the Japanese a great advantage. But what the Australian division might have accomplished was never put to the test, for Mr Curtin refused to sanction its diversion. He believed that Japan's next move would be an invasion of Australia and was adamant that the division's first duty was to defend its native soil. In vain did Churchill argue that such an invasion was extremely unlikely; in vain did he invoke President Roosevelt's advocacy and beg Mr Curtin to take a wide view of the war as a

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whole. Orders revoking the diversion to Rangoon had to be issued. They went out on 23 February and the division turned back. It distinguished itself greatly in New Guinea later on.

The authorities in Rangoon, however, were not immediately informed that their hopes of salvation had been dashed. The 24th passed and the 25th. Some suspicion that all might not be well seems to have reached Dorman-Smith by dark on the 25th, for at 11.30 p.m. he wired: 'It is of infinite importance to us to know whether Australian Division will arrive. Please say yes or no.' To this almost despairing cry he got the answer: 'Prime Minister to Governor of Burma. We have made every appeal, reinforced by President, but Australian Government absolutely refuses. Fight on.'

Churchill was bitterly disappointed at the failure of his attempt. He ended his palaver with Mr Curtin by sending him a very cold telegram and, as if to make him feel as uncomfortable as possible for having refused succour to a British administration in dire straits, he sent him copies of Dorman-Smith's wires of the 24th and 25th. And he did not leave the matter there. In his book he says: 'No troops in our control could reach Rangoon in time to save it. But if we could not send an army we could at any rate send a man.'

The man he sent was General Alexander, the future Field-Marshal, Viscount, Governor-General and Cabinet Minister. He was to take command of the army in Burma. Besides his reputation as a soldier, Alexander had qualifications that fitted him well for so uncomfortable an enterprise. He had been the last British commander off the beach at Dunkirk and was reputed to bear a charmed life. In the command now intended for him he would have to shepherd an army to safety and himself would be exposed to many hazards. Just the man, thought Churchill, for a forlorn hope, for he was never rattled, was naturally gay, and always ready to take on any task, no matter how forbidding, for the pleasure of the adventure and sense of duty done. He differed much from the great Wavell, who was a more serious intellectual, a more formidable personage. Yet the two resembled each other in this, that both had the power of lifting the spirits of those who served with them in the field.

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Alexander set off by air and arrived in India on 4 March. Wavell was again C.-in-C. India, for after the fall of Singapore he was ordered to close down his command in Java and he had arrived in India on 27 February. His visit to Burma on 1 March and meeting with Alexander at Calcutta on 4 March will be noted further down. For the moment we must look at Rangoon and see what happened there after 25 February when the news was received that the Australians were not coming.

To get the Chinese armies moving into Burma had become yet more urgent. During Chiang Kai-Shek's visit to India, nothing had been done by his staff in China. He had flown back on 21 February, and Hutton, hearing he would land at Lashio, hastened there to meet him, though the withdrawal from the Bilin was to start that night. The Generalissimo, however, did not land. He flew straight to Chungking and Hutton returned without seeing him. After the disaster of the Sittang it was the more necessary to secure his help. It was known that the Chinese armies were, in fact, divisions, that their fire power was even below a division's, and that they had no motor transport, commissariat, medical supplies or doctors. All these services would have to be provided by the British. Nevertheless, high hopes were still entertained and the greatest efforts were being made to induce these allies to hurry to our assistance. But they were not hurrying. By 26 February they had not yet started. On that day Dorman-Smith's wire was: 'Brigadier Martin (Liaison Officer) just returned Lashio from interview Chiang Kai Shek reports latter was inclined postpone any move 5th Army till certain points settled with General Officer Commanding Burma. He agreed however in view of urgency to first train move taking place 1 March.' There was rail connection between Lashio, on the frontier where the 5th Army was assembling, and Toungoo in central Burma, the town one hundred and twenty miles north of Pegu where the Chinese were to take up their position. Though the 5th Army did begin its move south on 1 March, it was not until a fortnight later that one of its divisions was in position at Toungoo.

During the last days of February, the Government in Rangoon carried on, waiting for news from the front and ready to leave as

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soon as the signal for demolitions was given. It now consisted only of Dorman-Smith and a very few officials, for, as already mentioned, headquarters had been established under Sir John Wise at Maymyo where the Council of Ministers had in part assembled. With officers and departments scattered about the country, communications disrupted and telephones not working, it was very difficult to form a clear idea of what was happening. There was a rumour, for instance, that a rebellion, organised by the Thakin party, was likely to break out in Tharrawaddy, a district some eighty miles north-west of Rangoon, on the main road to Prome and the Irrawaddy, the alternative route northwards if the road and railway to Mandalay were cut. This rumour fortunately proved false. Had it been true it would have added enormously to the difficulties of the army. So isolated did Dorman-Smith feel and short of reliable news about the situation as a whole, that he fancied Amery in London might be better informed than he in Rangoon and wired to ask for an appreciation on the 27th. Among many other matters he was most anxious about the Indian refugees who continued at the daily rate of a thousand or more to leave Prome and walk over the Taungup pass. They were, in fact, suffering from cholera, thirst, hunger and exhaustion and fell dead or dying in hundreds by the roadside. But detailed information of their state was as hard to get as the men and means to relieve it. A bureaucracy, however, is wonderfully tenacious of routine. It is recorded that the income tax department was still functioning in the safety of a town in Upper Burma to which its staff had been evacuated. People up country were as yet little alarmed because they knew very little. When 2 Burma Brigade reached Nyaunglebin, south of Toungoo, where they had been sent to join 1 Burma Division coming from the Shan States<sup>1</sup>, the local club asked the officers to take part in a tennis tournament.

But Rangoon was a dismal place. To quote from a report among Dorman-Smith's papers: 'Living conditions were at this period extremely difficult for those who were trying to carry on

<sup>1</sup>For route taken by 2 Burma Brigade after the fall of Moulmein, see note on page 87.

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essential work. Basic rations were distributed by the Food Controller, but fresh meat and vegetables were hard to come by and cooks were scarce. It was unsafe to live in isolated bungalows in the suburbs.' Disastrous fires swept the residential areas. 'Few shops escaped the attention of looters; particularly in the Indian and Chinese quarters the pavements were littered with abandoned merchandise containers.' Though the patrols had authority to shoot looters on sight, 'the military themselves caught the disease, and there is evidence that the rape of the Gymkhana Club cellar, resulting in the removal of over a hundred cases of liquor, was the work of soldiers.' The civil and military officers met daily to confer. 'The results of each day's meeting was a swing of the pendulum from hope to despair, from despair to hope again<sup>1</sup>—one day that we were going to hold Rangoon and should prepare for a long siege, next day that it was all up and we were quitting any moment. To these rapid alternations of policy can be ascribed much of the haphazard state of affairs that obtained, and right to the end no one in authority seemed to know whether our stay in Rangoon was a matter of months or hours.' The neighbourhood of Rangoon was infested with robbers and in Dalla, the suburb on the other side of the river, the Indian coolies who still remained there 'suffered severely from the violence of dacoits'. Dorman-Smith's wire on 27 February sums it up: 'I went round the city last night. Saw no looting, perhaps because there is but little left to loot.'

There was nothing at the front which warranted hope. After the destruction of the Sittang bridge on 23 February the Japanese divisions had moved upstream, as mentioned, to effect a crossing, and by the end of February they were advancing from the Sittang towards Pegu. Their plan was to sever not only the Rangoon-Pegu-Mandalay road and railway, but also the road and rail further west to Prome on the Irrawaddy, the only other exit from Rangoon to Upper Burma. The closure of these two

<sup>1</sup>Cf. the wire to Amery on 25 February: 'There has been quite an astounding wave of optimism here today. This is due to (a) the fact that the Japs have not arrived here, (b) an implicit belief that somebody will do something to help us.'

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exits would have a double effect. It would imprison in the Rangoon area what remained of the Civil Government and that part of the army which was south of Pegu; it would also cut the army in two, since the part of it north of Pegu was the part consisting of 1 Burma Division which about 1 March took up a position at Toungoo and Nyaunglebin. It had had to leave the Shan States before relief by the Chinese 6th Army. Reports now began to come in that the Japanese were infiltrating over the Pegu road and making for the Prome road to the west, the opening gambit of their manoeuvre to cut the British army in two and isolate Rangoon. Only small forces so far were over the first road, but experience had shown that the Japanese method was to begin a major operation with minor infiltrations. There was evidently no time to be lost. The city would have to be abandoned at once.

On the night of the 27th Dorman-Smith wired to Amery: 'Having heard all available evidence I have decided . . . that Rangoon must be evacuated tomorrow. At noon on the 28th the warning signal will go out, which means that all essential workers depart except demolition squads. Unless some miracle happens I propose to start demolitions at 7 a.m. 1 March. I bitterly regret that we must go from here, but I can see nothing in sight which can save Rangoon. . . . If we do not move, it seems almost a certainty that what remains of us here will be "in the bag". I take full responsibility for this most distressing decision, but can see no alternative if we are to make certain of the demolitions and of being able to continue to fight. Indeed, we shall be very fortunate if we live to fight in Upper Burma. I intend leaving at 8 a.m. 1 March after demolition orders have been given.' There was nothing more he could do in Rangoon, but he was badly needed at his headquarters in Maymyo, where his deputy, Sir John Wise, anxiously awaited him. The city, which had now become wholly an army responsibility, was placed under a military commandant.

At noon 28th the warning signal went out and all staff left except the demolition squads and the Governor. There remained, of course, a residue of the general population. For instance, some Indians, curiously enough, stayed because they thought they

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could do business with the Japanese. Such men were permanent residents and some had strong houses with retainers and compounds, in which they were safe from marauders. They had buried goods of various kinds and, in fact, did good business. Another class that stayed was the lepers. Dorman-Smith found time to visit the Leper Asylum. The nuns in charge, who were at their posts, did not anticipate harm from the Japanese. When he asked them how they would get food, they replied confidently: 'God will provide.'

In the afternoon of this last day a wire was received from Wavell to say that he would be landing at Magwe in Upper Burma the next morning and to ask that demolitions be postponed until he examined the situation himself on the spot. As Hutton had to meet him, Dorman-Smith decided to accompany him to Magwe and, after seeing the Commander-in-Chief, to continue to Maymyo, as previously arranged.

That night Government House seemed very lonely. Besides two guests, newspaper men from London, who had dropped into Rangoon when most other war correspondents had left the sinking ship, and whose presence Dorman-Smith welcomed, he had with him only his A.D.C., Eric Battersby, and his Military Liaison Officer, Wally Richmond. Of all the staff of a hundred and ten servants, only the cook and head butler were left. Yet, had they all been there, it would have been macabre—a servant behind each chair watching the last meal. How, too, have endured the silent stare of the Chaprassis, attendants in long white coats and red and gold waistcoats, whose duty was to stand and wait? But these acolytes, relics of grander days, were all gone on that fateful evening, evacuated to Government House in Maymyo, perhaps some of them making for India on foot. It was enough, and more fitting, that there remained only the cook and the butler, together with a few faithful behind the scenes, a sweeper or two, or a dog-keeper, like old Mongal. 'He knew many Governors of Burma, not by their own names but by the names of their dogs,' writes Eric Battersby.<sup>1</sup>

'We had mutton for dinner,' Dorman-Smith tells me. 'A sheep

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from the *Battersby Papers*.



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had been under my window for days and I had become attached to it. I was sorry to eat it, but we had nothing else. There was only a bottle or two left in the cellar, but what there was we finished, on the principle of "denying comfort to the enemy", a phrase then popular and cheerfully used by the soldiers who looted the Gymkhana Club cellar. The cook did wonders, he produced three courses, though as you can imagine, we were too upset to have much appetite. After we had eaten, we went across to the billiard room. There we played a haphazard game of billiard-fives, while the past Governors of Burma, whose enlarged photographs lined the wall, looked down on us with bland expressions. To them such a last supper would have been unthinkable. They seemed to irritate Eric Battersby. "Don't you think, H.E., that we ought to deny them also to the Japs?" he asked and took a billiard ball in his hand. I ought, I suppose, to have told him to put it down, but didn't and he let fly. The others joined in. It was a massacre.'

## CHAPTER XIII

### *General Alexander's Narrow Escape*

Next morning at dawn (1 March) Dorman-Smith left Government House for the airfield. His Karen body-guard, drawn from the Burma Military Police, deserted *en route*. Their wives and children lived in the Delta of the Irrawaddy, the great expanse of paddy lands west and south of Rangoon. Torn between two duties, they decided that the more important was to protect their families in the anarchy which had already begun and was likely to get worse.<sup>1</sup> For the Burmans generally the breakdown of law and order in the districts, as the police and courts were withdrawn, was the most alarming result of the invasion. At the best of times there had always been a good many robber bands in Burma. It was their chance now to make hay and they were taking it. Some of them claimed to be Thakin nationalists and there is no doubt that there was a criminal element in the extreme left. Minorities were particularly unsafe. We have seen the course taken by the Indians. The Karens, also a minority, were as likely to be victimised, but had no other country to go to. The ordinary Burmese villager, too, was far from secure. There had been wholesale desertions from the Burma Rifles due to this fact; terribly anxious about their wives and families, the Burmese soldiers took leave and went home. The military commanders do not seem to have made sufficient allowance for this and branded them as cowards and traitors when in many

<sup>1</sup>They afterwards joined the Judicial Minister, Saw Pe Tha (himself a Karen) who also thought it his duty to look after the Karens in the Delta. His wife was an Englishwoman. 'I fear that he and his wife were subsequently murdered by the Thakins,' writes Dorman-Smith.

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cases they were only husbands, sons and brothers, who thought that the greatest danger threatening their villages was robbers and that they would do more service by fighting them than the Japanese. This is a very poor justification in military opinion for deserting your regiment, but the fact that it was the cause of many desertions has to be given its due weight by the historian.

What happened when Dorman-Smith and Hutton met Wavell at Magwe can best be told by quoting Wavell's despatch. He says: 'I arrived at Magwe on the morning of 1 March and held a conference with the Governor, General Hutton and Air Vice-Marshal Stevenson. There seemed to me no reason why Rangoon should not continue to be held at least long enough to enable the reinforcements on the way, 63 Indian Infantry Brigade and a field regiment, to be landed. There was no evidence of any great enemy strength west of the Sittang, 7 Armoured Brigade was still intact, and Chinese troops were moving down towards Toungoo.' These words have the measured calm with which Wavell generally faced the world. But on this occasion he was not calm. The disasters of the previous month in Malaya and in Burma, and now the imminent loss of Rangoon, broke down his guard. 'It was the one occasion I know of on which Wavell's imperturbability failed him,' General Sir Thomas Hutton has told me.

In view of the determination to hold on to Rangoon a little longer, the demolitions, fixed for that day, were postponed until further orders. We have already seen how Wavell admitted under-rating the danger of the Japanese thrust at Moulmein. Now again he underrated their strength west of the Sittang. The delay in blowing up and abandoning Rangoon, though it enabled 63 Brigade and the artillery regiment to land, was nearly fatal, for seven days later the army was within an ace of being annihilated.

Though Wavell had ordered demolitions to be postponed, Dorman-Smith saw that it would be useless for him to return to Rangoon, and continued his journey to Maymyo. Wavell, accompanied by Hutton, flew to Rangoon. Hutton, of course, knew that Alexander was shortly taking his place; he had been informed on 22 February, the day before the Sittang disaster, of the appoint-

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ment and that he was to remain in Burma as Chief of the General Staff. He had held the Burma command for just over two months, during which the army had lost the line of the Salween and then of the Sittang. As my narrative will have shown, he had foreseen these disasters and had striven by every means in his power to avert them. But it was impossible to avert them without the resources to do so, as Wavell himself admitted in his despatch when he declared that even if he had taken a juster view of the danger he could still have done nothing. No General could have stopped the Japanese onrush in the circumstances prevailing at the moment. So it is not altogether clear why Churchill, who had also admitted that he was powerless to provide the resources which might have stemmed the tide, thought that by sending out Alexander he was at least making some contribution. When Alexander arrived, Burma was already lost. What remained to be done was to extricate the army. As we shall see, if Hutton's arrangements for demolitions and the evacuation of Rangoon had not been interfered with, the army would have been extricated without being exposed to the grave peril into which it fell.

But to return to Wavell's visit. He says in his despatch that after arrival in Rangoon on the afternoon of 1 March, he received a telegram from Smyth advising the immediate withdrawal of the troops at Pegu, on the ground, I assume, that it was likely to be encircled. After the disaster on the Sittang, 17 Division consisted of the remnants of 48 and 16 Brigades, to which was attached the Armoured Brigade.<sup>1</sup> On receipt of the telegram Wavell motored with Hutton to Hlegu, a village twenty miles south of Pegu, where divisional headquarters was at the time. After conferring there with Smyth, he decided that the troops at Pegu were in no immediate danger and refused to sanction their withdrawal. Smyth, he says in his despatch, 'was obviously a sick man, and I replaced him by Brigadier D. T. Cowan.'<sup>2</sup> Cowan took over some days later.

<sup>1</sup>46 Brigade (Brigadier Ekin) had been broken up and its battalions redistributed, as it suffered worst at the Sittang. 48 Brigade and the Armoured Brigade were at Pegu, but 16 Brigade had been withdrawn to Hlegu on 27 February.

<sup>2</sup>Now Major General D. T. Cowan, C.B., D.S.O.

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In point of fact the Japanese *were* in process of outflanking the division on the north. Hutton in his despatch states he had heard on 27 February that they were infiltrating across the Pegu road westwards with that purpose. That they had done so in considerable force was disclosed on 5 March when they attacked Pegu from the north-west. It seems fairly certain, therefore, that on 1 March, when Wavell met Smyth at Hlegu, they were developing their encircling movement, a manoeuvre difficult to detect, because they operated in small bodies in the jungle and under cover of darkness. Smyth's advice to withdraw his troops was therefore sound. Through not withdrawing, they narrowly escaped destruction, as will be shown further on.

Next day (2 March) Wavell flew to Lashio and saw Chiang Kai-Shek, and setting out the same night for Calcutta arrived there on 3 March, and met on 4 March Alexander's plane at noon when it came in. The two Generals held a consultation on the aerodrome. Wavell gave Alexander a résumé of the situation in Burma and ordered him to hold Rangoon as long as possible. He should, however, take care not to be cut off. If threatened in this way, he was to withdraw towards Upper Burma, where he must safeguard the oil fields at Yenangyaung, maintain touch with the Chinese and protect the India-Burma road through Tamu, so that its construction could be completed. Alexander was thus briefed by Wavell to disregard Hutton's advice to withdraw from Rangoon at once.

On receiving this directive, Alexander left for Burma and landed at Magwe later the same day. Next morning he flew to Rangoon and was in his headquarters by noon (5 March). There he took over from Hutton, who became his Chief of Staff. We have seen how during the three days since Wavell's visit the situation on the Pegu front had deteriorated exactly as Smyth had reported was likely. If Hutton had thought it time to vacate Rangoon on 1 March, it had grown much more imperative now. But how persuade his chief before it was too late? Fortunately, Alexander, when he saw with his own eyes the state of affairs, realised by the next day that Hutton was right. He came to realise that the Japanese were manoeuvring, not only to cut the Pegu

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road, which, in fact, they had already done, but also the Prome road further west, the sole remaining exit from Rangoon to the north. On the afternoon of the 5th, misled as he was by Wavell's orders, he did not see this. He went to Hlegu, where Hutton had gone to discuss the critical situation with Cowan. Hutton and Cowan had decided that 48 Brigade should withdraw from Pegu to Hlegu. Alexander cancelled this plan. 'I was not satisfied that Rangoon could not be held,' he wrote afterwards in his despatch. He thought that he could save the situation by preventing 'any further Japanese infiltration over the Pegu road and across the jungle-clad hills between it and the Prome road.' This might be effected, he believed, if the gap of forty miles were closed that existed between 48 Brigade and 1 Burma Division, which, as will be recalled, was now in position near Toungoo, with its southernmost brigade, 2 Burma Brigade, at Nyaunglebin, forty miles north of Pegu. Accordingly, he gave orders at once that 48 Brigade should carry out offensive operations northwards along the road and 1 Burma Division should operate southwards. But the Japanese were already over the road in such force that, as already stated, they were able to attack from the west and actually take part of Pegu town. This, of course, not only foiled Alexander's plan of closing the gap, but also showed that it was too late to close it, since the Japanese had forces west of the Pegu road sufficient to cut the Prome road.

Next morning, 6 March, the situation was made worse by the Japanese blocking the Pegu road between that town and Hlegu. This cut off 48 Brigade, just the very thing that Hutton and Smyth had feared. It became definitely known at the same time that the best part of a Japanese brigade was heading for the Prome road. To make the prospect yet more alarming news came in that the Japanese and some of the Burma Independence Army had landed at the mouth of the Rangoon river at no great distance from the great oil refinery at Syriam, whose denial to the enemy was the chief object of the demolition squads, who, if Hutton had had his way, would already have blown it.

These events, following fast on one another during the afternoon of 5 March and the morning of 6 March, convinced Alex-

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ander that Wavell was wrong and Hutton was right. He records in his despatch: 'In view of this situation I considered that the retention of Rangoon was quite impossible with the comparatively small forces at my disposal, dispersed as they were and with part of them already encircled.' It was not however until nightfall on 6 March that he reached this decision and ordered the evacuation to begin at daylight and the demolitions to be carried out thereafter as quickly as possible. Report was made to Wavell but the wireless had broken down and he did not hear until later.<sup>1</sup>

So next morning (7 March) the Rangoon garrison began leaving the city in a long line of motor transport. The fighting troops were the Gloucesters, the Frontier Force Rifles and a few tanks. The rest were non-combatants—the Army Headquarters staff of clerks, including some wives, it is said, who had refused to leave before, and administrative personnel of various sorts. 63 Indian Brigade, for which Wavell had held up the evacuation, had landed a couple of days earlier without its transport and been sent twenty-eight miles up the Pegu road on 6 March to join that part of 17 Division which was at Hlegu. It was largely composed of untrained young soldiers collected into a nominal brigade, which Hutton had been warned by India was not fit for active operations. He had so poor an opinion of its usefulness that he had not thought it worth waiting for. Admittedly, it was a reinforcement of sorts, but waiting for it had put the whole army in jeopardy.

Alexander and the retiring garrison drove on through the bright morning and were soon passing the airfield at Mingaladon. No aircraft were there now, for, as mentioned further back, Air Vice-Marshal Stevenson had been obliged to transfer his headquarters from it to India and was maintaining only a Wing at Magwe in Upper Burma. Fighters based there were too far off to protect Rangoon, but Stevenson, foreseeing the evacuation and conscious that to leave the retreating army without any fighter protection would be to invite calamity, had improvised some

<sup>1</sup>See his wire to Churchill dated 7 March in *The Second World War*, iv,

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rough airstrips at points further along the Prome road. From these his few Hurricanes were now making sorties to keep the sky clear over the long column.

So the withdrawal proceeded. Beyond Mingaladon at mile seventeen the fork was reached where the right leads to Hlegu and Pegu, the left to Prome. The vehicles had gone a short distance up the left fork when rounding a corner about 11 a.m. beyond the village of Taukkyan the leading company suddenly perceived that the road was blocked. The Japanese had done what Hutton estimated that they intended to do. Alexander had left it too late. He was trapped. (As we shall see, however, the Japanese plan was more far-reaching than the mere blocking of the Prome road.)

It is hard to conceive of a graver situation. Here was the Headquarters of the army strung out in column for miles along the road, and halted by an enemy force of unknown strength. It had evacuated its base, now in process of being blown up. It could not go back or sideways and was blocked from going forwards. Alexander, his staff, the whole organisation of the army in Burma, were already virtually prisoners. If the Japanese played the cards they appeared to possess, there was no hope. All they had to do was to attack in force from the woods on both flanks, while maintaining the block.

Alexander had been in tight places before. But this looked like the tightest in his life. He was threatened with the total loss of his army on the second day after assuming command. But as Churchill wrote later, he was never rattled and his habitual calm did not desert him on this occasion. Immaculate and debonair, he ordered his two battalions and some tanks he had to attack the block. They were unsuccessful, though they pressed the attack throughout the afternoon. The refinery at Syriam twenty miles away had been blown by this time and vast clouds of black smoke came rolling over the sun.

Though Alexander could not move the block, it was encouraging that the Japanese were not attacking on flank or rear. Their main body, perhaps, had not yet come up. But it was hardly to be supposed that, when their command heard that the British



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General and his headquarters were at their mercy, they would delay to order a decisive blow.

Meanwhile Alexander had sent for help. 63 Brigade, which had been ordered up the Pegu road towards Hlegu, was recalled. 48 Brigade was still cut off north of the road block beyond Hlegu, but the rest of 17 Division was at Hlegu. It was ordered to come to Taukkyan at once. On arrival these troops sought to open the way for Alexander, but they also failed to move the Taukkyan block. 'The situation was very serious,' wrote Alexander in his despatch. The army had to bivouac for the night where it was. Next morning at dawn a full scale assault on the block was mounted. It met with no opposition. No Japanese were found behind the block. The road was cleared and the column proceeded on its way.

How to explain what had happened? At one moment General Alexander's career seemed about to end in a Burmese jungle; the next he was marching on to a Field Marshalship and a peerage. Why did the Japanese let him and his army go when they had him in their clutches?

The only satisfactory explanation is that the Prome road block was not intended to trap the British army, but was an item in a strategic movement by which the Japanese planned to take Rangoon by surprise. The city could be seized, they estimated, without their having first to overcome the forces between it and them. And with the capital in their hands and its garrison prisoners, the fate of the British army would be sealed; its scattered elements could be mopped up afterwards. Moreover, if they could take Rangoon by surprise, they might capture entire its refinery's vast stocks of petrol, its docks and other amenities. They could not surprise it by coming down the Pegu road. It was the shortest route, no doubt, only fifty miles, but to go that way, besides making surprise impossible, would be otherwise disadvantageous; the Pegu plain would expose them to tank attack and the terrain would afford them little opportunity of using their jungle tactics of secret infiltration which had hitherto given them superiority on the ground. Their plan was to make a wide circuit. Instead of marching south through the open and along a motor road, they

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would march west through thick jungle. Bearing south-west, this course would bring them to the Prome road. On reaching it, however, they would not approach the city that way, but cross it and continue a little further hidden in the jungle before wheeling left and making for the suburbs. Coming in, as they would be, from the north-west, a quarter from which no attack was anticipated, they would be into the city before their approach was suspected and be able quickly to overwhelm the garrison and capture the refinery undamaged.

The troops selected for the surprise attack on Rangoon made their way over the thickly wooded hills between the Pegu and Prome roads. Common prudence required that they should block the Prome road lest their encircling movement were discovered and a motorised force from Rangoon made a dash at their flank. The commander detailed to go ahead and make the block was told, presumably, to hold it until the main body was over the road and safely on the outskirts of Rangoon. He can only just have completed the block on the early morning of 7 March, when he saw Alexander come up with motorised troops at 11 a.m. and assumed his intention was a flank attack. At that time the Japanese main body cannot yet have crossed the Prome road. It did so probably that night and by the late morning of 8 March was approaching Rangoon. The commander at the block, having protected the flank as ordered, and so completed his task, had his orders to withdraw his men into the jungle and follow as fast as he could into Rangoon.

It remains for a military historian to describe in detail what actually happened, which will only be possible if he can draw on Japanese sources. It is well known that the Japanese system of command was very rigid. A plan once decided upon was rarely altered. Alexander's escape may have been due to this. It was not expected that he would try to escape or that, should he try, he would leave Rangoon as soon as he did. Since his presence at Taukkyan was unprovided for, the commanders were incapable of readjusting their plans. One feels that the commander at the block must have suspected that he had trapped the escaping British army. His superiors, however, intent on

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getting to Rangoon and surprising the garrison, evidently did not believe this, if he reported it to them. Anxious to avoid being delayed, they went round what they conceived was a small force sent to intercept them. This lost them a golden chance. Never again were they to have opportunity for a knock-out blow.

This episode, which has been the subject of animated discussion ever since, was the most dramatic in the first Burma campaign. Alexander was in the greatest conceivable danger. To emerge from adventures of that sort you want to bear a charmed life, the charmed life with which he has often been credited.

In conclusion we must hear Wavell's comment: 'While my intervention on this occasion postponed the evacuation of Rangoon for a week and enabled reinforcements of an Infantry Brigade and a field regiment to be landed, it eventually placed General Alexander in a difficult position and led to his forces being nearly cut off. . . . On balance I am satisfied that we gained by the delay.' Wavell, as we have seen before, always took the blame, if he thought he had made a mistake. On the whole he did not think he had made one in this case. One is bound to disagree. He ran too great a risk. Hutton was right when on 1 March he advised that prudence and commonsense demanded an immediate evacuation.

When the garrison left Rangoon on 7 March, some six hundred volunteers, Europeans, Indians and Anglo-Indians, remained behind for the demolitions. The first explosions went off at 2 p.m. The work only took an hour and a half as the fuses and dynamite were ready in position. Two steamers were in port to carry the volunteers to India, a precaution in case they should be cut off. Mr T. L. Hughes, who was in charge of the civil volunteers, tells me that some forty of his men elected to try and remain in Burma and, himself among them, followed Alexander up the Prome road. When they reached the bottom of the queue of vehicles two miles long before Taukkyan, they perceived that they had run into a battle. 'A staff officer came up to me,' says Hughes, 'and strongly advised us to go back. It was then 5.30 p.m.; the last ship was to leave at 6. We turned round and went full speed for Rangoon. The ship was anchored at the Hastings

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some miles down the river and launches were waiting which took us on board.'

Professor Pearn, in a report made for Dorman-Smith, thus describes what they saw on the way to their ship: 'As the launches passed down the Rangoon River against a strong flood-tide, a strange spectacle was presented to the eyes of the weary passengers. A heavy pall of smoke hung over the town, but a light southerly wind kept the smoke off the foreshore. . . . The electric power station was ablaze; . . . the port warehouses were blackening skeletons; . . . on the jetties the cranes, damaged by dynamite, leant over at a drunken angle. . . . All along the normally thronged foreshore not a sign of human life was to be seen. By the time that Syriam was abeam, it was almost dark and the flames, topped by columns of dense black smoke rising thousands of feet into the air from the oil refineries, presented an awe-inspiring sight; and as the night fell the whole sky was lurid with the glare of that inferno.'

## CHAPTER XIV

### *General Stilwell makes his Entry*

Lady Dorman-Smith's diary tells of happenings in Maymyo after her arrival on 21 February. Her daughters, who had preceded her by three days, were still there. By the look of things, they would have to go to India sooner or later, and it was clearly sound sense to get them off before the rush. The town had no fighters, no A.A. protection nor effective warning system, and a raid on 22 February caused many casualties. Planes evacuating women were leaving most days from Lashio, the Burma Road town by the frontier. But Lady Dorman-Smith herself did not think it right to leave. On 23 February she notes: 'Telephone message from Government House (Rangoon) that we must all pack up and leave for Lashio immediately. Completely thunderstruck. Rang up Reg and I told him it would be fatal if I go. Can't understand the suddenness of all this.' But her two daughters had to go with a suitcase each, leaving all their possessions behind. 'It was horrid seeing them go. It is all so tragic.' However Miss Gibbs (a monkey) arrived from Rangoon. 'She travelled on the top of a lorry and seemed none the worse.' On the 25th the rest of the dogs came up. Geoffrey Miller, the Military Secretary, who had taken the girls to Lashio, phoned to say they had been flown out that morning. Lady Dorman-Smith adds: 'Frightful rumours about here that I had left. So John Wise and I went for a state drive!' On the 28th, the Governor's last day in Rangoon, she has: 'A year ago we set sail from Liverpool! What a change! Still in telephonic communication with Government House. . . . Awful stories of the looting in the docks where there is whisky, gin, cigarettes in enormous quantities and people

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all rolling tight. . . . Can't imagine what R. is going through. It is all so heart-breaking.' Next evening the news of Dorman-Smith's departure from Rangoon was received, and late on 2 March he arrived 'in good form though terribly tired. He had flown to Magwe the day before to attend a conference with Cyclops (Wavell).' From there he travelled by land in 'a convoy of Gypes (an early spelling) armoured car and ordinary cars—troops armed to the teeth. The most awful accounts of the burning and looting in Rangoon. Government House was left.' Apparently there had been a proposal to burn it. She continues: 'During dinner it was decided that R. should motor up to Lashio and see Cyclops, Sissimo (Chiang Kai-Shek) and heads. So he and John Wise left at 2 a.m. with G. (Geoffrey Miller). Poor R., it is all so heart-breaking for him. The last days at Government House must have been quite nightmarish.'

The 'heads' included a new character in this story, the fantastic General Joseph Stilwell, whom Roosevelt had just sent to Chiang Kai-Shek to command, if the Generalissimo agreed, the Chinese armies in Burma. (They were not yet in position). Stilwell flew into Lashio from India at 7 p.m. on 3 March; Wavell had left Lashio at dawn that day to meet Alexander at Calcutta, as the reader may recall. *The Stilwell Papers*<sup>1</sup> contains the General's diary. It is the most vivid and indiscreet document of the period. Stilwell, known generally as Vinegar Joe, was an American of the Americans, a tender-hearted fellow, full of prejudices and who spoke out (or anyway jotted in his diary) whatever came into his head. He did not look like a General, but like a tramp or a character actor on the films or a dissenting parson or even somebody out of *Alice in Wonderland*. Yet, for all his extravagances and whimsicalities, Stilwell was a great man, as was Wavell despite his strange silences, his cruel defeats and his many mistakes.

Stilwell first met Wavell on 28 February, the day before Wavell flew to Magwe. In a letter to Mrs Stilwell dated 1 March he says: 'Yesterday, met General Wavell, who flew down from

<sup>1</sup>*The Stilwell Papers*, edited by Theodore M. White, published 1949. Stilwell died in 1946.

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Delhi on his way to Burma. He's a tired, depressed man, pretty well beaten down.' He met him again on Wavell's return from Burma on 3 March, just before he himself started for Lashio. The diary has: 'Usual fuss of departure. Saw Wavell at airfield. More hopeful. Had to buck them up. They were shy of information, to say the least.' The plane then drops Stilwell at Lashio where he finds Chiang Kai-Shek with the commanders of the armies detailed for Burma. Diary entry for the same day continues: 'Strained attention of Fifth and Sixth Army commanders while Chiang K'ai-shek<sup>1</sup> was talking to them; sharp, clipped staccato voice of Chiang K'ai-shek on upper porch of Porter House; hushed quiet below; small fry whispering and keeping me from pushing in.'

Stilwell's first object was to get a definite order from Chiang Kai-Shek appointing him Commander of the two Chinese armies in Burma. It was half understood that he was to command, but nothing had been fixed. From what follows it will be clear that he found Chiang Kai-Shek just as difficult to deal with as Wavell had done. On 6 March he had a conference with him at Chungking. In the course of it Chiang gave him to understand that he was to command the armies. He notes in the diary: 'It was a relief to find that the G-mo contemplates command in Burma for me. . . . Chungking isn't half bad when the sun shines.' But the prices were awful—eighty dollars for a pair of garters. He found Chiang extremely suspicious of British motives and intentions and contemptuous about their defeats. 'I asked about the general plan for operations in Burma and he said there was none. Wavell had not made any agreement with him, so the Chinese troops were just waiting for direction.' This, as we know, was quite untrue.

Three days passed with Stilwell himself waiting for direction from Chiang, who could not make up his mind what strategy to adopt and would not let Stilwell settle it. Stilwell wanted to get the whole Fifth Army, under General Tu, down to Toungoo and

<sup>1</sup>Stilwell, who had previously resided in China, knew the language. His transliteration of the Generalissimo's name, with the apostrophe indicating the half aspirate, is correct. In my spelling I follow common English usage.

### *General Stilwell makes his Entry*

attack the Japanese before they could build up; Chiang would not hear of this. It seems that the Chinese 200th Division, one of the four in the Fifth Army, had by now moved into position at Toungoo. The others were still on the frontier. As a Chinese division was not as strong as a brigade, one division meant very little. On 9 March after dinner Chiang was very abusive about the British. 'God damn 'em, they left Rangoon and didn't tell the liaison officer. The bastards had promised gas for our tanks and troops and hadn't delivered.' Chiang continued to rant in this way. Not that Stilwell minded him abusing the British. He was tremendously amused at the account given of Chiang and Madame Chiang's visit to India. 'The Chinese had a grand time in India. The Limeys<sup>1</sup> thought they were impressing their guests, but the Chinese were laughing most of the time. Actually Chiang K'ai-shek was much more impressed with Gandhi and Nehru than with the whole damn British Raj. Poor old General Hartley<sup>2</sup> thought he'd made a tremendous hit with Chiang K'ai-shek because he shook hands twice on leaving.' Stilwell's prejudice against the British in Asia had its roots in the anti-colonial sentiments of the Americans. It seemed to him the funniest thing on earth that those 'bowlegged cockroaches' as he called the Japanese, whose guts he longed to 'wrap around every lamp post in Asia', should have got the solemn Raj on the run. But entertaining as he found Chiang's after-dinner conversation, he wanted instructions, he wanted to get on with the job; the war situation was extremely critical; the Burma-China road was already closed. Moreover, he had to work in with the British. He understood, (though as yet this was far from clear), that Alexander would be in supreme command. 'Exactly what am I to do?' he asked Chiang. To which he got the answer that he had better go to Maymyo and find out what the Limeys were up to. He comments in his diary: 'What a directive. What a mess. How I hate the Limeys. And what a sucker I am.' And he wrote to his wife: 'My job is just endless grief and its too early to say if I can do anything. . . .

<sup>1</sup>Stilwell generally calls the British by that name.

<sup>2</sup> The late General Sir Alan Hartley was C.-in-C. India while Wavell was in Java.



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Leaving tomorrow to see the British and try and arrange some general plans which are lacking. . . . Its the hardest job I ever had handed to me.' He left Chungking on 11 March.

Referring to Lady Dorman-Smith's diary at date 12 March we find: 'Entertained General Stilwell, the American Commander of the Chinese Armies . . . to lunch. Stilwell looks like a professor. Generals Hutton and Dennys were also there. After lunch General Alexander and his A.D.C. Sir Rupert Clarke arrived. So it was a very Brass Hat Day.'<sup>1</sup>

This was Dorman-Smith's first meeting with Stilwell, for though both of them had been at Lashio on 3 March, they had not met as Stilwell stayed only seventy minutes between planes, arriving at 7 p.m. and leaving at 8.10 p.m. The account which Stilwell has in his Diary of the meeting on the 12th (possibly before lunch) is this: 'Talked with Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith and gave him the works. Told him we'd start in shooting the Burmese if they got tough with us. He said O.K. Agreed to help in any way he could and told me to call on him direct. Astounded at my commanding the Chinese troops.' This is a very moderately worded entry for General Stilwell and shows that he rather liked Dorman-Smith. His next paragraph is more in his usual vein and concerns one of the luncheon guests. 'Dennys came in, breathing fire and destruction. The goddam Chinese won't rush in and save the British Empire. He's going to tell Chiang K'ai-shek what to do and Chiang K'ai-shek can jolly well better do it. (Dennys might better have let Chiang K'ai-shek alone—he was killed at Kunming in a plane crash on his way up.)'<sup>2</sup>

To return to Stilwell's entry about his talk with Dorman-Smith. His threat to shoot the Burmese is connected with his anti-colonial fixation. He believed the Burmese had risen against

<sup>1</sup>For the previous day the entry is: 'General Hutton arrived this afternoon looking very tired. They must have had an awful time getting through the Japanese lines (the road block). However they did do it, but it must have been touch and go.' Maymyo had become army as well as civil headquarters. General Dennys was Chief Liaison Officer with the Chinese.

<sup>2</sup>The part in brackets was added later by Stilwell. General Dennys was killed on 15 March when flying to Kunming with Fogarty, who was injured and died in hospital.

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the British in favour of the Japanese (not unnaturally, in his view, considering what a revolting institution the Raj was) and would probably attack, murder, sabotage, or otherwise mishandle the Chinese as British allies. The rumours he had heard of the Burmese Independence Army had no doubt been magnified into a national uprising. It is to be noted that the Chinese troops were also under this delusion and in fact did shoot a lot of innocent Burmese. His remark that Dorman-Smith was astonished to hear he commanded the Chinese armies also requires comment. Dorman-Smith notes: 'Stilwell was ushered in and announced that he had come to make a courtesy call as he was in command of the Chinese forces operating in Burma. I expect I registered some surprise as I had not been informed of his appointment and one would not normally expect an American to be in command of the Generalissimo's armies. But anyway we had a pleasant chat and off Stilwell went. My next appointment was with a Chinese General, Tu<sup>1</sup> by name. I asked him what his job was and was not a little puzzled to hear that he too was commanding the Chinese armies in Burma. I said: "But General Stilwell has just told me that he has been appointed to that job. You cannot both be commanding your forces." Tu smiled. "Ah, Your Excellency, the American General only thinks that he is commanding. In fact he is doing no such thing. You see, we Chinese think that the only way to keep the Americans in the war is to give them a few commands on paper. They will not do much harm as long as we do the work."'

The quotations from the Diary have already shown how vague Chiang Kai-Shek had been about Stilwell's powers and as the book proceeds it will become clear how limited they were.

The two Generals' counter-claims amused the inmates of Government House. The next day Lady Dorman-Smith sums up the problem in her diary: 'There seems to be some confusion as to who is really C.-in-C. of the Chinese armies as various Chinese Generals arrive and say they are. And Stilwell says he is and Alexander thinks he is. So it is all very muddling.' Eric

<sup>1</sup>His full name was Tu Yu-ming. He was in command of the Fifth Army, due to go to Toungoo.

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Battersby, one of the party who billiard-balled the late Governors, added another feather to his cap that evening, for, says Dorman-Smith, 'I found on my desk the following:

*Alexander, Stilwell and Tu,  
Met at G.H. in Maymyo,  
They were somewhat perplexed  
And equally vexed  
When trying to set out who's who.'*

The rhyme continues but I don't think Mr Battersby would like me to quote any more.

Though Alexander arrived at Government House after lunch on 12 March, Stilwell did not meet him till the next day. His diary entry of 13 March records his first impression of the British General who was, or perhaps was not, to be his C.-in-C. 'Very cautious. Long sharp nose. Rather brusque and *yangch'i* (stand-offish). Let me stand around while waiting for Shang Chen to come (Director of the Foreign Affairs Bureau of the Chinese General Staff). Uninterested when Shang did come. Astonished to find ME—mere me, a goddam American—in command of Chinese troops. "Extrawdinery!" Looked me over as if I had just crawled out from under a rock.' Alexander's Irish charm and cultivated accent irritated Stilwell, as did the cut of his uniform and Guard's manner. He seemed too British for words. Stilwell himself lacked presence and he knew it. He was intense and could guess that Alexander did not care for intense chaps. One feels, however, that he did not dislike Alexander as much as he made out. Nevertheless, an amiable co-operation between the two seemed unlikely.

Stilwell had a busy day and had gone to bed, when he was knocked up by Geoffrey Miller, the Military Secretary. The Diary has the scene: 'About midnight, Major Miller, from the Governor's office, barged into my *bedroom*, woke me up and said General Alexander wanted to see me at 10 a.m. at Flagstaff House. Can you beat it? I wonder what those babies would have said if I had sent Dorn<sup>1</sup> on a similar errand to them? Its just the superior race complex, for which they will pay dearly.'

<sup>1</sup>Major Frank 'Pinky' Dorn, his aide and close friend.

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In spite of his resentment Stilwell kept the appointment punctually. Alexander, however, was half an hour late. In the course of their talk, Stilwell explained his ill-success in getting from Chiang a clear statement on the command of the Chinese armies. The Diary has: 'When he fully understood the command business, he was shocked. "That makes *my* position impossible from the start." So I gave him a dirty look and said I wasn't exactly on a bed of roses, myself. He just stared blankly at me, as much as to say, "I wonder what the boulder means?"'

It would take too long to describe the ups and downs of 'the command business'. Suffice it to say that it was never cleared up. In the last paragraph of his despatch Alexander says: 'There was no real unity of command of the Allied Forces in Burma, although I had been nominally appointed Commander of the Chinese Armies. Consequently full use could not be made of the forces available.' In paragraph 21, however, he says: 'General Stilwell and his American staff could not have been more loyal or co-operative throughout the campaign. General Stilwell had my complete confidence.' But Chiang had not his complete confidence. The nominal unity of command was nullified by the Generalissimo's devious methods. Alexander would order Stilwell to move, say, a division. Stilwell had to give the order through General Lo, who was the Chinese C.-in-C. of the 5th and 6th Armies.<sup>1</sup> But Lo could not pass on the order till it was sanctioned by Chiang. He was forbidden, however, to approach Chiang direct; he had to submit the order to the Liaison General Lin at Lashio. And that was not the end, for General Lin was obliged to approach a superior liaison officer, General Hou, whose headquarters were Maymyo. Hou then asked for Chiang's sanction. This nonsensical system, worse than the reddest red tape ever imagined in a roaring farce, must have ruffled even Alexander's massive calm, though there is no sign of this in his despatch, where, with an understatement of which only the British are capable, he merely observes: 'Such an arrangement was obviously quite unsuitable for modern war since quick decisions for the

<sup>1</sup>This may seem to contradict Tu's claim, but see Lady Dorman-Smith's diary entry on p. 216. She speaks of several claimants.

### *General Stilwell makes his Entry*

employment of the Chinese forces were impossible to obtain'. The plain fact was that Chiang kept the command of the Chinese Armies in his own hands. Direct talks with him led nowhere. His smile was wonderful, his promises magnificent. Alexander went to Chungking, Dorman-Smith to Lashio, and Chiang himself and Madame visited Maymyo. But the outcome was not more than smiles and promises. 'All he wanted was everything,' is the way Stilwell sums up Chiang.

Alexander and Stilwell were thus thrown into each other's arms. Stilwell did all he could to make an impossible arrangement work by taking the risk of issuing orders on his own responsibility. He got to like Alexander. He stopped abusing and laughing at the British in his diary. By 15 March Alexander has become Alex, is described as pleasanter and even as making a joke. By 22 March he is 'O.K. now. Took everything nicely.' And on 14 April Stilwell touchingly records: 'Alex calls me "Joe" now.'

## CHAPTER XV

### *The Refugees*

When Dorman-Smith reached Maymyo on 2 March he found, among a mass of telegrams awaiting him, the following from Amery: 'Your telegrams have been of the greatest help in enabling us to appreciate the situation, even if they have not given cheerful news. . . . You will have to be the life of the defence, so keep fit. Please express my appreciation of your Ministers, who seem to have stuck it well.'

All the Ministers, with four exceptions, were in Maymyo. Of the absentees, Saw Pe Tha, as we have seen, had gone to the Delta to protect his Karen constituents; another had entered a monastery and two were with their families somewhere in the country. The rest, headed by the Premier, Sir Paw Tun, immediately called at Government House and made it clear that in the appalling crisis of the moment their one desire was to co-operate to the full. The Governor, as we know, had the power to assume control of all departments in emergency. But even now, when the emergency was infinitely great, with the capital and most of Lower Burma lost, he preferred to retain the Council in being, certain that the advice and countenance of his Ministers was more valuable than a free hand. It was unthinkable to repulse them. Yet he was continually being pressed to assume autocratic powers by those who imagined that, without the Ministers, orders could be given sooner and would be carried out more effectively, a notion correct perhaps in the first contention but certainly ill-founded for the second.

Though the invasion resulted in a gradual breakdown of the administration of which the criminal classes took full advantage,

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there was no rising by the people in general. Indeed, their attitude to the retreating British, civil and military, was actively kind. They sold them food and bullock carts, and monks on occasion placed their monasteries at the disposal of officers. Officials were not subjected to rudeness or indignities. The extreme left party, the Thakins, certainly advocated risings timed to coincide with the Japanese advance. But their influence and village organisation were insufficiently strong. The arrest of so many of their leaders, moreover, had thrown them into confusion. The invasion, too, had come sooner and moved so much faster than anticipated that a general rising could hardly have been arranged in the time. Behind the Japanese front Thakin Aung San continued to recruit for his Burma Independence Army and is said to have raised about a division. But it is uncertain whether the Japanese used these irregulars in the line, since they were untrained.

Deputy commissioners of districts, as communications between them and the Government became more difficult, were thrown on their own resources. It was on the 10th of this month of March 1942 that Dorman-Smith sent them a message authorising them to act as they thought best. It read: 'At this stage of the war there is only one unforgivable sin, which is the failure to take decisions and carry them out. You may be doubtful about your decisions and wish to refer them to higher authority. If you are close to the front or in other vital positions do not worry about referring to anyone. Act. Provided your decision is one calculated to embarrass the enemy and contribute to our war effort, I will back you right or wrong.'

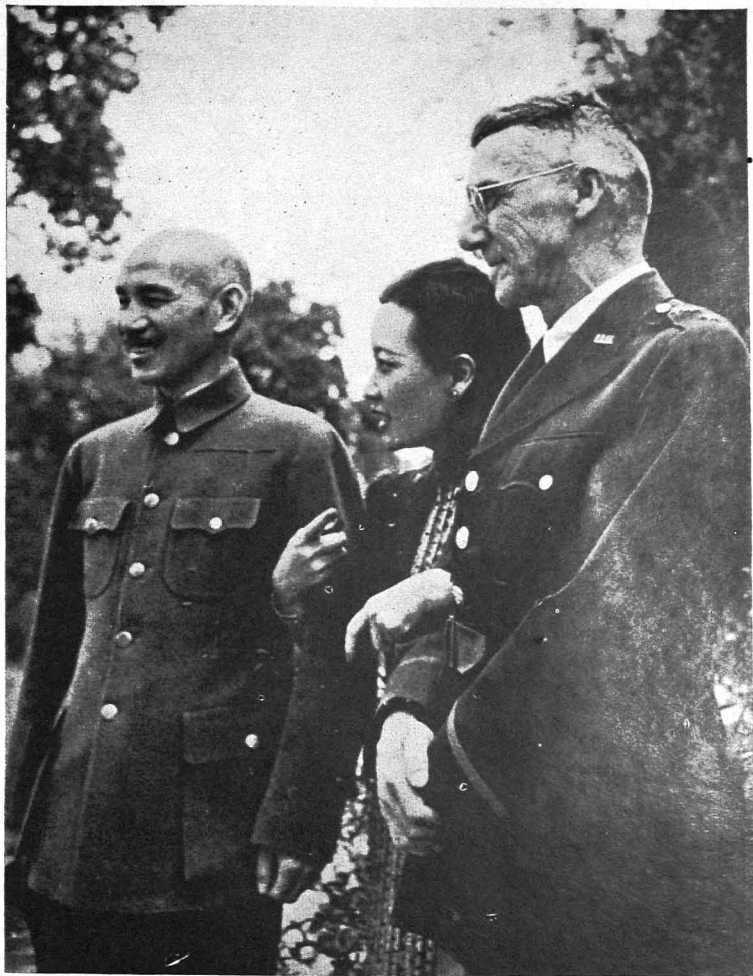
Of all the many arduous problems, which confronted the Government during March 1942, the most insoluble was that of the Indian refugees. Up till the fall of Rangoon the exodus was via Prome to the Taungup pass. Some 100,000 Indians went that way. The pass did not lead directly into India, but to the village of Taungup in Arakan, the coastal strip which is separated from Burma proper by a high range. Thence the journey to India was by launch along creeks and inland waterways. Prome to Taungup was one hundred and ten miles, a week's march over uninhabited waterless mountains. Cholera, hunger, thirst and exhaustion

## *The Refugees*

caused four thousand deaths, chiefly on this stretch. An official report written by Professor Pearn of Rangoon University gives a vivid account of what it was like to be in charge of the refugee camp at Taungup. Mr P. Burnside of the Forest Service had been placed on special duty there to control and embark them on the launches and boats which had been sent to carry them on their way to India. But far more vessels than could be brought to Taungup were required to evacuate such multitudes over a distance of hundreds of miles. On 27 February there were 22,284 refugees waiting at Taungup for boats to take them off, a figure which does not include children. They camped as close to the jetties as possible and as launches arrived struggled to push their way on board. Mr Burnside's job was to issue them with tickets, first arrivals being first served. Though sufficient food was in stock at the village, there was not enough water. Launches could remove at most a thousand people a day. There was bound to be a long wait. Better wells existed at a place four miles away. Mr Burnside tried to explain this to the thirsty crowd. Scarcity of water would increase, for more people were arriving daily. On 23 February alone nine thousand had arrived. He begged his hearers to move to the wells. But they refused to leave the neighbourhood of the jetties because they were afraid of losing their places in the queue. 'At the end of all this speech-making the whole crowd got up *en masse*, shouted Gandhi-ki-jai (Victory to Gandhi) and sat down again', he wrote. (In their misery the thoughts of these poor people turned to Gandhi, as to a saint with miraculous powers of deliverance.)

The scarcity of water was made worse by the improvidence of the refugees. Hot, covered with dust, sores and insect bites, they could not be stopped from bathing at the wells. To get off the women and children first and save them the struggle at the booking office, Mr Burnside arranged to issue them with tickets separately. But most of the women sold their tickets to men and then applied again. The richer Indians would pay anything for a ticket. 'What could one do to help such people?' Mr Burnside wrote unhappily in his report. Worse still, 'there were brokers buying tickets in quantity and selling them again to refugees at





*(by courtesy of Mr S. I. Hsiung)*

9. Generalissimo Chiang Kai-Shek, Madame Chiang Kai-Shek  
and General Stilwell at Maymyo



*Paul Popper photograph*

10a. Entrance to the Ananda, 12th century pagoda at Pagan on the Irrawaddy, north of oilfields



*Crown Copyright photograph*

10b. Chindwin River near its confluence with the Irrawaddy

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a good profit.' Pickpockets and cheats also preyed on them, but the sufferers would not give evidence in case they should miss the next launch. 'I will relate,' goes on Mr Burnside, 'one instance, a typical one, of the mad desire to get away. In the general *mêlée* of embarkation a man had his head cut open—I did not see how it happened—and he was bleeding rather profusely. I was running about half demented trying to control the mob and this man kept chasing me around in spite of my repeated orders to go and see the doctor and not pester me at this time.' The fellow wanted to profit by his wound and claim that it gave him priority for a ticket. Mr Burnside at last let him have one. 'He left full of smiles and a perfectly happy man,' thinking himself very lucky to have had his head cut open.

Here is Mr Burnside's description of the scene when a launch came in. 'There was always death by suffocation or drowning lurking around. . . . To put women and children at the head of the jetty . . . was of no avail. The crowd behind broke through and trampled on them. Barbed wire . . . did not stop them; they came over it with torn clothes and flesh. The crowd could be kept back only by severe beating. I mention this unhesitatingly as there have, no doubt, been many complaints of beating, but it *had* to be done to check the mob. . . . The local police . . . were utterly useless. Their main idea was squeeze.' Mr Burnside was the only Englishman at this terrible place. As an Imperial Forest officer he was used to the quietness of teak woods, to the genial companionship of elephants and Burmese woodsmen. Now, like most other British civil officers in the country, he was on special duty, trying in his English manner to see fair play. He had an assistant called U Kantaya, who used to travel from Taungup village to the top of the pass to bury the bodies lying by the roadside. By promising a priority ticket to any refugee who helped, he would clear the road for the time being. Some of the refugees were sweepers from the Rangoon hospital. These men, before they would touch a corpse, required not only a ticket but a bottle of spirits. A subordinate of the same department, called U Po Choe, who was in charge of three road camps, had a specific for curing all diseases—alcohol and the intoxicating

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hemp drug called *ganja*. The qualified doctors had fled. Presently, when people in India learnt of the plight of their compatriots at Taungup, the Bengal and the Madras Medical Missions came to the rescue, but did not arrive until 18 March. It is an interesting sidelight on human nature that some of the refugees were Rangoon tradesmen who brought merchandise with them in carts and did business as they went along. The report has: 'One Marwari was observed selling his cloth wares after he had boarded a launch at Taungup.'

After the fall of Rangoon on 8 March and the retreat of the army northwards, the way out from Prome over the Taungup pass was blocked. The only other practicable exit was the Tamu pass, four hundred miles away to the north, the pass over which the military road, so long talked of, was to go. There were various approaches to it, but the best was from Mandalay. Indians from all over Burma now headed for Mandalay, which could be reached by road, rail and river. By the second half of March over 100,000 refugees were in camps outside the city. An observer writing on 15 March of the camp at Amarapura, some eight miles south of Mandalay, says: 'The refugees were along the river bank under trees as far as the eye could see. I calculated that there were ten thousand of them. There was no sanitation, no order, no burning of litter. Fifty cases of cholera had died on the previous day and they were burying the dead on the morning of my visit. I saw four more cases while I was there, all *in extremis*. The Health Officers were trying to chase round and inoculate people and get some form of sanitation but with little success.'<sup>1</sup>

The obvious cure for the congestion at Mandalay was to get the refugees moving towards the Tamu pass as quickly as possible, as they themselves ardently desired. But the military authorities had felt obliged to close the road. It was vital to the army's safety that the work being done on it should not be interrupted, since it was both the sole supply route and the sole means of escape. To let tens of thousands of refugees surge along it, diseased, exhausted and dying, would delay the workmen striving to complete it. Only five hundred refugees a day were allowed to go.

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from Professor Pearn's Report.

## *The Refugees*

In his wire home of 15 March Dorman-Smith says: 'With military limitations of numbers on Tamu road refugee problem appears almost insoluble. We must face the fact that at the present rate of flow into Mandalay a vast number of Indians will have to remain on here.' The danger, he points out, was that if the military situation worsened and the Japanese began to approach Mandalay, a panic-stricken multitude would break out towards the pass and choke it.

It is impossible to do more in this book than to state the horror of the problem confronting officials in the middle of March. Though they did not know it, they had only seven weeks in which to solve it. But solve it they did with very tolerable success. About 200,000 Indians eventually got over the Tamu pass to safety. On this route few died. The casualties were in the Mandalay camps before they started, when at the worst period at the beginning of April five hundred a day were dying of cholera. But this mortality was reduced to ten a day by the devoted efforts of the officers placed there on special duty. The total number of deaths in the camps will never be known. That the army was in no way incommoded, or its withdrawal endangered, by refugees on the road is testified to by Alexander himself. In para. 90 of his despatch he says: 'The civil organisation for refugee evacuation in Burma did remarkably well and I should like particularly to mention Mr Vorley, who was in charge of the evacuation from the Mandalay area and Mr Hughes<sup>1</sup> I.C.S., my Chief Civil Adviser. In the withdrawal to India, the feeding arrangements for the thousands who came through Kalewa and Tamu worked extremely well and very few demands were made on the army for rations. The refugees themselves were no bother and the majority of them, more particularly the women, displayed a courage and heroism under most trying conditions which were worthy of the best traditions of India.' This testimony hardly

<sup>1</sup>We last met Mr Hughes superintending the Rangoon demolitions and escaping to India by boat. On reaching Calcutta, he immediately flew back to Burma to place his services at the disposal of the Government. He was appointed Chief Civil Adviser to General Alexander with the honorary rank of Brigadier.

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fits the picture we have had of the refugees at Taungup, but that it was the opinion of the Commander of the British forces and that he was quite satisfied with the efforts of the Civil Government, is the important point in this connection.

On 21 March Dorman-Smith left Maymyo on a five day tour of the Shan States. His object was to find out how the Sawbwas viewed the future and to have a look at the Chinese 6th Army, whose headquarters was at Loilem, in the centre of the States. The Shan plateau is the most delightful part of Burma. The inhabitants are an olive-skinned, easy-going people, who were incorporated in the Burmese kingdom centuries ago and who, though they speak a distinct language, have the same religion as the Burmese and a way of life which is not dissimilar. Their rulers, the Sawbwas, were at this time hereditary ruling Princes, holding direct from the British Crown, some of them old-fashioned rustic gentlemen, others B.A.s of Oxford and Cambridge. The ceremonial of their courts preserved the memory of the old Court of Mandalay. None of them were rich men, though the majority were comfortably off. They were extremely anglo-phil, but now faced with a Japanese invasion, the question was—what should they do? What, indeed, could they do? They were harmless, defenceless, peaceable men, living in the quiet of a deep countryside. They had evolved a way of life that suited them perfectly and was as near paradise as they could imagine it. But the cruel waves of the world were breaking on their borders. Reality was about to burst into their dream.

When Lady Dorman-Smith heard that she was to go on this trip, she was delighted at the prospect of even a momentary distraction from crushing anxieties and a daily round of duty and service. 'It will be a break,' she noted in her diary. 'The change will be good for all. . . . We leave early tomorrow. Eric (Battersby) is due back today and Wally (Richmond) is going to be left in charge of Miss Gibbs (the monkey) etc (the dogs).'

They set off in the Rolls at 8.30, 21 March, and drove via the Goteik Gorge to Hsipaw, the capital of the leading State. The palace there was like an English country house and stood among lawns and English flowers. While Dorman-Smith was in con-

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clave, his wife visited the old palace, now disused as a residence, and saw the throne room, where on state occasions the Sawbwa sat, as his overlords the Kings of Burma had once sat at Mandalay. It belonged to a world very different from the republic which Thakin Aung San would soon be bringing in. With its seven roofs, its lacquered pillars, and its standards of insignia, it was a document of old Asia which contrasted strangely with the machine-armed Asiatics who were advancing to seize it.

If the Hsipaw palace belonged to the past, there had occurred that very day on the plain of Burma below an event which belonged very much to the present. The British air force wing at Magwe had been completely destroyed on the ground. Small though the force was, it had afforded some protection. From then onwards till the end, the army and the towns of Burma were completely at the mercy of the Japanese planes. This disastrous news was not, of course, known to Dorman-Smith as he talked to the assembled Sawbwaw next day at Lai Hka, but without it the prospects were gloomy enough. He found them more luke-warm than he had expected. They had no intention of resisting or trying to impede the Japanese, should they attack the Shan States. Indeed, their chief anxiety was, lest in the breakdown of law and order that was likely to ensue, Burmese armed gangs would attack them. It was against these marauders they intended to fight if they could get more arms and men.

From Lai Hka the party set off to Loilem, a town fifty miles to the south, the headquarters of the Chinese 6th Army. 'We drove through lovely country, up and down, high mountains and valleys. It reminded me of Portugal,' wrote Lady Dorman-Smith. Here they met General Ch'en, the Commander of the 55th Division of the 6th Army. In the course of conversation he said in a friendly way, quite unaware of the conceit and ignorance he was displaying: 'We are sorry for you. You have been defeated so often. But don't lose heart. Look at us. We now know all about war, as we've been fighting the Japanese for the last ten years. You too will learn if you stick to it.' A month later in their sweep through the Shan States, the Japanese broke and scattered the 55th Division so utterly that it was never heard of again.

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After lunch at Loilem the party drove on to Taung-gyi, the administrative capital of the States. There they met the Sawbwa of Yawng-hwé, afterwards to be the first President of the Republic, and the Sawbwa of Mong-pawn, who five years later, as a Minister in Thakin Aung San's Cabinet, was assassinated along with him. Any prevision of such destinies was far from their minds and, like the other Sawbwaws met at Lai Hka, they were preoccupied by the cares of the moment, particularly the ruin of the trade on which they depended, and their want of salt, which they had been accustomed to import from Rangoon. On being asked if they desired to be evacuated to India, they declared that they must stay and take their chance.

The next day, 23 March, on Yawng-hwé's invitation, the party drove to his capital on the Inlé lake. Lady Dorman-Smith writes: 'The street was lined with children, all cheering and looking so happy. Met at the landing stage with white umbrellas and the flunkies in their gay uniforms and conducted onto the boat. We were towed by three boat-loads of leg-rowers, a most remarkable performance. The men stand side by side (there were about 50 in one boat) and propel the boat by twisting their leg round the oar. The lake is lovely and full of little floating islands, which are gradually assembled to make a large piece of land, which is cultivated and made into a vegetable garden.' So she describes the lake and the gaiety. For the moment they had forgotten their troubles. As they paddled along, the Mahadevi<sup>1</sup> of Yawng-hwé said to them: 'You're bound to win the war in the end, and will have to deal with the Siamese for joining the Japs. The thing would be, so as to get them for the Empire, to make my husband and me King and Queen of Siam.' It sounded just right in the paradisaical scene. So passed their last carefree day in Burma.

Instead of returning to Maymyo the way they had come, they had decided to drive down from the hills onto the plain of central Burma and see what was happening behind the front. To grasp the bearing of what they saw there, we must take a glance at the military situation, as it had developed since 8 March, when

<sup>1</sup>The title of the chief wife of a Sawbwa, a Sanscrit word meaning Great Goddess.



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Alexander passed the road-block and withdrew towards Prome. The fortnight had seen a lull. The Japanese did not immediately pursue in force, but refitted and rested their troops, exhausted after their two hundred and fifty mile advance in six weeks from the frontier to Rangoon. Moreover, the docks had to be quickly repaired so that reinforcements could be landed. The pause gave Alexander time to improve his position. At the moment the two divisions composing his army were separated: he had 17 Division with him, but 1 Burma Division was still between Pegu and Toungoo.<sup>1</sup> The only way for it to reach him on the Irrawaddy was northwards through Toungoo and then westwards via Taungdwingyi, as its transport could not cross the Pegu hills. That meant a round of two hundred miles. After the leading division of the Chinese 5th Army reached Toungoo, the change over was effected safely. 1 Burma Division was halted at Allanmyo, forty miles north of Prome. The two divisions were now combined to make a corps, called 1 Burcorps. Lt.-General Slim, who later distinguished himself so much, arrived on 19 March to take command of it.

This move was strategically very sound. The divisions were now united as a coherent force instead of being scattered about the country and liable to be destroyed in detail. The Corps could withdraw directly up the Irrawaddy bank to Yenangyaung, the oil-fields, one hundred and ten miles north, which its duty would be to defend or in alternative destroy. In the latter event, the withdrawal would continue to the Ava bridge by Mandalay. This was the only place the tanks could cross the river towards the Tamu road, if, as was becoming probable, the Corps could not maintain itself in Upper Burma and had to evacuate the country.

In this retreat the office of the two Chinese armies would be to protect Alexander's eastern flank. Without the Chinese 5th Army, the Japanese could advance up the main road and railway to Mandalay, strike at his flank and rear and cut him off from the Ava bridge. If the Chinese were defeated and driven back, he would retire level with them and keep his flank covered. They

<sup>1</sup>Brigade cut off north of Hlegu fought its way out and joined the main force on the Prome road.

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did not (at first no one did) think of themselves merely as the flank guard in a retreat. They would not have come, had they not believed it possible to defeat the Japanese, a not wholly unreasonable hope on paper, as the Allies had now four divisions against the two Japanese. But the Japanese were bringing in two new divisions. With the port of Rangoon their base, the resources of the lower country at their disposal and their air force now unopposed, they were in a vastly superior position to their opponents, who had no base and whose food, munitions and spares were limited to what they carried with them or had dumped further north.

From the civil point of view, the effect of this strategy was to hand over to the Chinese the eastern half of what remained of Burma. The British administration was still there; the district officers had not been withdrawn. The order remained for them to hang on till the last moment. But it could hardly be said that the administration was functioning. In the area which the Dorman-Smiths were about to visit the police had begun to desert. Military deserters were also about. Criminal gangs had started to operate.

To help the Chinese to get food and accommodation and also to protect the Burmese from them, Mr F. S. V. Donnison of the Indian Civil Service was made Chief Civil Liaison Officer. In a paper he sent me on his experiences, he thus describes what Chinese methods were like: 'Discipline was both lax and cruel—generally lax, cruel when asserted. I remember being told of the following incident, which occurred I think at Pinyinmana. Some Chinese officers were in the club with British liaison officers. Servants ran in to say Chinese soldiers were looting the club stores. The Chinese officers demanded to have the culprits pointed out to them. When this was done, they took them outside and prepared to shoot them. The servants interceded for them and the officers so far relented as only to cut off their ears. Most Chinese officers with whom I had to do were inscrutable and quite impervious to request or argument. They were not exactly unpleasant to us, but just went their own way, obstinately refusing to take any notice of what we did.'

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Leaving Taung-gyi on 24 March, the Government party in the Rolls, with a car in front carrying the bodyguard and a jeep behind with the staff, made the 3,500 feet descent to the plain. At the foot of the hill they passed through Thazi without stopping and were soon speeding across the flat to Meiktila. It was learned afterwards that had they not passed an hour sooner than expected, a gang would have been waiting for them on a lonely stretch of the road. Its object was the Governor's capture and sale to the Japanese. 'A bit of private enterprise that went wrong', as he summed it up to me.

Of Meiktila Lady Dorman-Smith notes: 'Very hot and had a disturbed night with dogs and birds! Heard that the Japs had cut round Toungoo.' That was the point. The lull had ended. The Japanese had attacked the Chinese at Toungoo and the British at Prome. It was the beginning of the end. Dorman-Smith had exactly six weeks more. Next morning the party returned to Maymyo via Mandalay.

## CHAPTER XVI

### *The Nightmare*

**T**he nightmare began. It wasn't so bad for Alexander. He knew what was happening, what he could do, what couldn't be done, where he was going, how to get out. He had his bad moments, it was touch and go more than once, but his troops were together under his hand, and provided he could think one or two moves ahead of the Japanese, he could make it. But no one else knew anything for sure. Was 1 Burcorps heading for India or would it stand in Upper Burma? How long could it stand without replacing casualties, without fresh supplies of ammunition? And if it did go out, when would that be? All maddening questions for Dorman-Smith who had to see that his civil officers escaped, had to get the refugees away, had to think of European women and children, of the Anglo-Indians and of his faithful Ministers, who if left behind might be victimised by the Japanese or murdered by their political rivals, the Thakins, who in the southern part of the country were already paying off old scores. It was no good his asking for a time-table. Alexander could only answer: 'I'm fighting a battle. How can I tell for sure what's going to happen? I'll hold if I can and as long as I can. I must prepare to leave, but may not have to. Or at least not so fast. In war all's incalculable. I can't give you any dates.'

In such circumstances a Governor's job becomes a day-to-day improvisation. He cannot plan ahead with any certainty. He waits for the military Commander. He, embodying the law, finance, justice, protection for the people, is pushed into second place. Government, the people, must take their chance. The Commander is not to be pestered with their poor human anxieties. He

## *The Nightmare*

is making his dispositions. His dispositions concern his troops. He will be judged afterwards only on his military address. He is not responsible for the people. If they suffer, it is the Governor's fault. As Lady Dorman-Smith wrote of the post of Governor: 'What a beastly job!'<sup>1</sup>

So the nightmare began, a nightmare that lasted six weeks, whose tempo increased, which became more horrible, more daunting, bad followed by worse, momentary hope dashed at once, nothing to be done but carry on, and keep calm and keep at it and try this and clean up that.

But we must take it bit by bit and listening to the voices of our characters, as they reach us from the records, piece together the last scenes. First, to go back to 24 March when the news came in at night to Meiktila that the Japanese had 'cut round Toungoo'. For the previous day Stilwell has in his diary: 'Toungoo being attacked. Tu (commander of the 5th Army) worried.' Only the 200th Division was at Toungoo. The other two in the 5th Army, the 96th and 22nd, were miles to the north. He sends them hurrying south in support. 'Rushed back to Maymyo to get things going. Bed midnight.' Next day he orders the 200th Division to fall back northwards before it is encircled and writes to his wife: 'You will know before you get this what I'm up against and it's not a pretty picture. . . . I think of you often and picture the scenes in Carmel (his home in California). What a paradise. My travelling is done now, definitely, and if I can just get back there, you won't be able to throw me out.' (We are beginning to understand Stilwell better. Underneath a forbidding exterior he was all heart.)

On 25 March he notes that Chiang Kai-Shek gives him permission to move the 22nd Division in support of the 200th, a step he had already taken on his own initiative three days earlier. 'Christ. The mental load of a commander who has strings tied to him.' Things get worse. '26 March. If the Japs will only subside just for today, we have a chance.' But they increased their attack. 'Tu had one of his depressed fits. . . . Christ, he's terrible when he's like that. He's a hard guy to handle. He must have every-

<sup>1</sup>In her diary during March 1942.

## *The Nightmare*

thing just so.' A rumour that the 200th had been wiped out. 'Tu went into his room and wouldn't come out. . . . Anyone who wants my job can have it.' On the 27th the 22nd Division is nearer and Stilwell hopes for a counter-attack. He asks Tu who replies: ' "Well, I don't know. Must *shang liang* (think it over)." ' Tu again went into his room. I guess it's impossible.' The fact was that the 200th was surrounded at Toungoo and its only hope was to cut a way out north towards the 22nd.

Then at 6 p.m. the frightening news: 'Martin (the British Chief Liaison Officer) in to say the British *had started to withdraw from Prome*. Well this will raise hell. Martin much ashamed about it. *What to do?* Tu is too much for me.' The awkward thing was that Chiang Kai-Shek had threatened to recall his troops if the British withdrew from Prome. But Martin's news was not true. Alexander did not decide to withdraw till 1 April. Indeed, on 28 March he put in a counter-attack south of Prome in an attempt to relieve pressure on the Chinese front. On its failure and the Chinese retreat from Toungoo, he was obliged to follow suit.

On 26 March Dorman-Smith had wired Amery that the 200th Division was encircled, that the Japanese were advancing towards the oil fields and were turning Alexander's position at Prome. In Alexander's despatch we find the sequel. 'On 28 March the Chinese 22 Division attacked south . . . with the object of relieving the 200 Division at Toungoo, but made little headway, and on 1 April the 200 Division cut its way out from Toungoo.' It retreated behind 22 Division, a withdrawal of some sixty miles to the Pyinmana area. That same day Alexander ordered 1 Burcorps to fall back from Prome up the Irrawaddy to Allanmyo. He was forced to this retreat both by Japanese pressure and the necessity to cover his flank. The withdrawal continued beyond Allanmyo and by 5 April 1 Burcorps was eighty miles north at Migyaung-ye and stood there covering the oilfields forty miles on.<sup>1</sup> Between it, on the river, and the Chinese,

<sup>1</sup> Burma Brigade (Brigadier Bourke) was on the west side of the river, serving as flank guard, to prevent the Japanese from sending a fast column up the west bank and cutting off the main body on the east bank by crossing higher up. The brigade continued as flank guard throughout the retreat.

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on the railway by Pyinmana, was a gap of ninety miles. To stop the Japanese passing up through the gap to the oilfields Alexander placed 17 Division at Taungdwingyi, a cross-roads, half-way between the two forces, and asked Tu to send a Chinese division there, as his own force was too small to close the gap. That Tu did not do so, had, as he wrote, 'the most serious consequences.'

These grave events brought Wavell over from India, the last visit he paid to Burma during the campaign. He was at Army Headquarters in Maymyo on 31 March and 1 April. In his original directive to Alexander on 4 March, he had ordered him to hold the oilfields. After discussing the situation with him now, he feared that might no longer be possible and the two of them drew up a plan to be followed if the army had to retreat beyond Mandalay. A stand might be possible in the north of Upper Burma. While 1 Burma Division should block the approach to India, 17 Division should fall back up the railway to Myitkyina, retaining touch with the Chinese 5th Army. This plan was communicated to Dorman-Smith and he made his arrangements accordingly. These included sending refugees to Myitkyina, from whose airfield they could be flown out, and making Myitkyina his headquarters, should he be obliged to leave Maymyo. As we shall see, pressure of events made this plan impracticable and it was amended on 25 April when it was decided that 17 Division should not go north but join 1 Burma Division in a retreat westwards to India. How gravely this embarrassed Dorman-Smith, who was not told of the change till 2 May, will be related in its place.

Wavell was accompanied by his A.D.C. Peter Coats. I quote from a letter<sup>1</sup> written by Coats on 3 April, as it gives a glimpse of how Burma then seemed to a visitor from India. 'On 30 April we flew to Calcutta, changed planes, flew on in a Hudson to Mandalay, landed in a paddy field; atmosphere tense, hot, the air heavy and sweet, sickeningly so; the reason cholera. Motored through jungle, past strings of refugees to Maymyo. Stayed with the Dorman-Smiths. Their house was in order, only some things lacking: no soda water, no soap and no ink, but lots of straw-

<sup>1</sup>Mr Coats was kind enough to send me a copy of this letter.

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berries, wine, etc. Maymyo is quiet still, only occasional air raids and still above the cholera belt which, however, is creeping up the hill.' Next day he motored down the hill again to Mandalay and thence some hundred miles over the plain to Magwe where Wavell was inspecting. This was the area where Dorman-Smith and his wife had nearly been ambushed on 24 March. The criminal gangs were out and Coats felt the anarchy and menace in the air, the furnace air of the dry zone in the hot weather. He writes: 'It was a nightmare really, a frieze of bullock carts, refugees; Burmans, like malignant nursemaids in their skirts and white caps, all carried long knives, and looked resentfully at our car. At one point, outside Mandalay, the sides of the road were a mass of corpses; some were days old, the heat and enormous flies were revolting. As it grew dark we had loaded revolvers on the seats beside us, in case of dacoits or "free Burmans"<sup>1</sup>.'

During these days Stilwell had been trying to stiffen the Chinese troops. His diary shows him tearing backwards and forwards between Maymyo and the front. The disjointed sentences vividly reflect his agitation. 'General Liao (the 22nd Division's commanding General), is a colourless bird. . . . They'll do nothing unless I can somehow kick them into it. . . . Hot as hell, we are all dried out and exhausted. I am mentally about shot. . . . Liao and Tu have dogged it again. The pusillanimous bastards. . . . I can't shoot them; I can't relieve them; and just talking to them does no good. So the upshot of it is that I am the stooge who does the dirty work and takes the rap.' When he tried to corner Tu and force him to a decision, he would go and phone. 'He would scream and yell over the telephone endlessly, sometimes not even appearing when I left.'

On 1 April Stilwell flew to Chungking to see Chiang, furious at the way the Chinese Generals were able to flout him. 'At 12

<sup>1</sup>By 'free Burmans' the writer means Aung San's partisans, the Thakins. The Burmans who looked malignant some may have been ordinary peasants, who always carry *dahs*, an agricultural implement which is something between a chopper and a sword. No doubt they had a grim air. It is not pleasant to be in country where two foreign armies are fighting and where law and order have broken down. But Coats is certainly right about the general atmosphere. It must have been very sinister.



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noon went down and threw the raw meat on the floor.' He threatened to resign. But Chiang calmed him. 'We can straighten it out,' he declared with his wonderful smile, and promised to go personally to Burma and tell the Generals to obey. Stilwell returned to Maymyo on 6 April. Chiang and Madame also flew there that day.

In all this Stilwell shows he believed that if Chiang and the Chinese Generals did what he told them and attacked in full force from their position round Pyinmana, he could retrieve the situation. He did not know that the Japanese were in the act of mounting against him a wide flanking sweep. The fall of Toungoo had uncovered a lateral road which climbed onto the Shan States plateau. A strong motorised force was about to take that road and within three weeks would cut his communications with China.

The advance of the Japanese both up the Irrawaddy valley and up the main road and railway to Mandalay was accompanied by the heavy bombing of towns on both routes. As the British airforce had been eliminated, the bombers unloaded their explosives in comfort. The towns were mostly overgrown villages of thatch and bamboo, dry as tinder in the hot weather. One bomb and they blazed like a haystack, the flames fanned by the middle-day wind of that season. Methodically every town in Burma was being burnt to the ground. On 3 April it was Mandalay's turn, the capital of Upper Burma, one hundred and fifty miles north of Pyinmana. The railway station was destroyed, the hospital gutted and the fire brigade wiped out by a direct hit on their garage, where the men were standing by with a few antiquated steam and hand appliances. Four hundred people were killed 'many of whom' as the official report phrases it, 'were blown into the moat surrounding the Fort<sup>1</sup> and drowned or, wounded and trapped, swallowed up in the fierce flames which devoured two-thirds of the town in a few hours.' Mandalay was out. All the police deserted except fifty. Looting began at once, and arson in the part not already burnt.

<sup>1</sup>Fort was the name given during the British Raj to the palace and moated demesne of the last Burmese king, a very beautiful place.

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On 6 April Dorman-Smith and his wife drove down from Maymyo to find out what could be done. Her diary record of the visit is: 'The scenes beggar description. Acre after acre of streets are burnt completely flat. The streets are littered with burnt trees, telephone wires down everywhere, burnt out gharries, one with the remains of the pony—just too appalling for words. . . . There was hardly a civilian to be seen. . . . The smell was awful. It looks absolutely hopeless to begin to clear the mess. There was no warning. The first thing was the bombs. The wind helped a lot as it kept shifting and fanning the flames. Rangoon was nothing to this destruction.' In an official report Dorman-Smith writes: 'Never have I seen such a pathetic sight. The life of the town had ceased.' As most of the population, including the employees of the municipality, had fled, it was impossible for the British officials, all of whom remained on duty, to get the dead bodies, human and animal, disposed of quickly enough. However, after the experience of bombing in Rangoon, a special mobile column, separate from local defence, had been raised by the Government. This column, consisting of a hundred picked men with vehicles, had moved into Mandalay to clear the streets and restore such essential services as light and water.

On the return of the Dorman-Smiths to Maymyo that evening they found that Chiang Kai-Shek and Madame had arrived. They had been invited to stay at Government House, but the Generalissimo refused on the ground that he and his wife were simple sort of people and unused to luxury. A house had accordingly been placed at their disposal. There they installed their own style of luxury, which greatly exceeded, Dorman-Smith tells me, anything that he could have provided.

They were invited to dinner next day, 7 April. Chiang accepted but Madame sent word that she had a headache and could not come. About 8 p.m. when it was announced that Chiang was approaching with his bodyguard, a large and heavily armed posse of police, Dorman-Smith went to the door to receive him. He was surprised to see Madame also walk in. He writes: 'I said: "How nice of you to come. I do hope your headache is better." "Headache be damned," she replied, "my cosmetics hadn't



*Paul Popper photograph*

11a. Naga girls in a market  
on the hills west of  
the Chindwin River



11b. Aerial view of the Hu-  
kawng route between  
Burma and India after  
Stilwell had built a  
motor road in 1944

*Associated Press photograph*



12. Admiral Lord Mountbatten

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arrived. Do I look all right now?" Her face was completely varnished.'

Of this occasion Lady Dorman-Smith noted: '7 April. Had a most interesting dinner party. The Generalissimo and Madame Chiang Kai-Shek. They have come down to discuss the military situation. Issimo speaks no English and Mme goes everywhere, as she says she can interpret just all he feels so much better than anyone else. She is very much all there! He has a most delightful smile. Alex. and John Wise and General Tu also dined.' There is no mention of Stilwell having been present, though he had arrived in Maymyo the previous day and had a conference with Alexander and Chiang at 7 p.m. 'Chiang K'ai-shek laid it on thick<sup>1</sup> and Alex told his side of the story; parted in amity. Chiang K'ai-shek said: "*Consult General Stilwell: he has full powers to handle the Chinese troops*".' (Stilwell puts this sentence in italics to show that he had at last got Chiang to make an unambiguous statement about the command in front of witnesses. But he was deceived in thinking that it had any validity.) While Lady Dorman-Smith sums up Madame as 'very much all there', Stilwell's diary contains a fuller sketch of her character, written at this time. He calls her 'Madamissima', in itself an acute observation. He concedes that she is a very clever woman, and is direct, forceful and energetic. But 'she loves power, eats up publicity and flattery and is pretty weak on her history. She can turn on charm at will and knows it'. He adds that, like Chiang, she had a very poor opinion of the British and, indeed, of all foreigners.

During this visit to Maymyo she made herself disagreeable to Dorman-Smith. She and Peanut (Stilwell's other name for the Generalissimo) drove down to Mandalay to inspect the damage on the afternoon of 8 April. While there she saw corpses floating

<sup>1</sup>This, I think, was a complaint at the complete lack of British air support for the Chinese. When Alexander explained that he had none either, Chuang seems to have been satisfied. He had been told this before but evidently had not believed it. Alexander also repeated the request he had made to Tu for a Chinese division to be sent to Taungdwingyi to help block the approach to the oil fields. Chiang promised, but did not keep his promise. (see para. 30 of Alexander's Despatch.)

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in the moat of the Palace City. They were the bodies of those who had been blown into the moat and which only now had risen to the surface. Madame was indignant. She thought the corpses had been pitched into the water as an easy way of disposing of them. The civil authorities were evidently neglecting their duties. She was then told by one of her Generals that the Chinese Red Cross at Lashio had offered their services and been contemptuously refused. She returned to Maymyo in a rage and informed Dorman-Smith that she intended to apprise Churchill by wire of the way the Government of Burma conducted its affairs. He went round to find out what had upset her. Enquiry showed that the Chinese Red Cross had made no offer of assistance. Nor could it have done so, because it was not in Burma. Madame, however, refused to withdraw her accusation and sent off her wire to Churchill. Surrounded by sycophants who played up to her prejudices, she had but an imperfect grasp of what was really happening. In this case she wanted to show her power and make Dorman-Smith cringe by threatening to report him to his Chief. (Madame Empress was another of Stilwell's names for her.)

The next ten days were as critical for Alexander as had been the Taukkyan road block; he nearly lost his army again. We may turn to Stilwell's diary for some preliminary glimpses of the predicament. The American left Maymyo on the afternoon of 8 April and passed through Mandalay ('A shambles. Still burning and stinking.') on his way south to the 5th Army at Pyinmana. Accompanied by Generals Tu and Lo<sup>1</sup> he inspected the troops there next day. 'We all made speeches. Mine was very *chien tan* (simple). Lo screamed for 30 minutes. Then Tu for 15.' The men seemed full of fight. He was reassured. Next day (10 April) he received an upsetting piece of news. 'Letter from Chiang K'ai-shek welshing on agreement with British about 96th Division. Now says one battalion enough.' This refers to Chiang's promise

<sup>1</sup>Lo Cho-ying is described as Stilwell's Executive Officer or Personal Assistant. But he was also C.-in-C. of all the Chinese forces in Burma. That this post of C.-in-C. existed is further proof of how ill-defined was Stilwell's position.

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of 6 April that he would send a division to Taungdwingyi to help Alexander close the gap.

Alexander's despatch tells the result. To understand what follows one must remember that by placing 17 Division at Taungdwingyi, Alexander had divided his forces. His other division, 1 Burma Division, on the river at Migyaung-ye, was thirty-five miles west of Taungdwingyi. On 10 April the Japanese made a thrust north and broke through the centre of 1 Burma Division. 'Owing to the non-arrival of the Chinese division which had been promised for the defence of Taungdwingyi the Commander of 1 Burcorps (General Slim) now felt that he could not continue to hold Taungdwingyi and also cover the direct approach to the oil fields.' It was a dilemma. If 17 Division stayed where it was, the thrust towards the Yenangyaung fields could not be stopped. If, to hold the thrust, it was moved from Taungdwingyi west towards 1 Burma Division on the river, the Japanese would have a clear run north. A fast motorised column sent through Taungdwingyi up the road by Natmauk to Meiktila would turn the British army's flank and, if the column reached Mandalay, eighty miles on, would cut its communications with Maymyo, the headquarters. Alexander was therefore obliged to hold at Taungdwingyi and sacrifice the oilfields. On 13 and 14 April the Japanese thrust through 1 Burma Division continued. There was nothing for it but to destroy the oil wells. The explosives had been laid and they were detonated at 1 a.m. on 15 April. Just after the powerhouse was destroyed, the Japanese entered the town. They had passed right through 1 Burma Division, which was therefore left to the south of them. Though foiled in their attempt to seize the wells intact, they now hoped to destroy 1 Burma Division, half of the British forces. With this object in view, they established a double road-block north and south of the Pinchaung, a half-dry river bed, immediately above Yenangyaung, thereby blocking its retreat northwards. It looked like checkmate if the Japanese were in sufficient force. If they could destroy 1 Burma Division, they could afterwards mop up 17 Division, left behind at Taungdwingyi, distant sixty-five miles by road.

Stilwell's diary is again invaluable here. On 14 April, when

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the order to blow the wells was about to be given, Stilwell was with the 5th Army on the railway at Pyawbwe, sixty miles due east of Yenangyaung. He writes: 'Tu in at 9 p.m. with deep gloom. Saw British yesterday—complete demoralisation . . . destroying oil fields. Expects prompt breakdown on British front . . . Alex wants me at once at Maymo.' He immediately jumped into his car and driving through the night arrived at Maymyo at 4.30 a.m. (15 April). 'Slept till 7.30 . . . saw Alexander at 9.30. Did Aleck have the wind up! Disaster and gloom. No fight left in British. . . . Fears a division is pouring up the road.' A discussion followed and Stilwell promised to send Chinese troops to clear the block at the Pinchaung. (It was at this conference that he was first called Joe by Alexander.) A despatch from Chiang Kai-Shek, who almost daily admonished Stilwell, was now handed in. The diary has: 'Letter from G-mo, full of crap and nonsense—"Give each squad a watermelon."'

Dorman-Smith was informed of what had transpired and wired to Amery that night. 'Events are moving fast. The military appreciation today is far from cheerful.' And he goes on to say that it looks as if the Japanese would be in Mandalay within ten days. At any rate it would be prudent for him to work on that assumption. The Government must prepare at once to move north from Maymyo before it was cut off. There would not be much of Burma left to govern, nor Ministers to govern through. The Premier and the Finance Minister wanted to be flown out at once. But if administration was ending, there were still many duties to perform. Thousands of Indian refugees had still to be got off, and the staffs of the departments. He ends: 'We have done our very best over the refugee problem, but I doubt whether there ever has been one of such magnitude with so many complications. We have recognised to the full our responsibility to these poor people and will continue to do so till the end. War is uncertain and it may be that with Chinese help we shall obtain a longer breathing space. But just at this moment the situation must be considered grim.'

Stilwell also wrote home. 'We are about to take a beating, I think,' he told his wife, 'but maybe somebody else will get hurt



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too. Already quite a few Japs have decided to stay in Burma permanently. . . . *Carmel!* I don't dare think too much about that, or even about the family. But I am happy in knowing you are all together there. Enjoy it and some day I'll be back and look you up. With a long white beard and a bent back!! Give Garry (his dog) some coffee with my best wishes.'

Everyone was feeling a bit homesick and miserable that night in distant Maymyo.

The next five days saw the danger at the Pinchaung grow worse and then lift, though a new and more fatal danger loomed up in the Shan States. Alexander's despatch tells us what we want to know. Stilwell placed the 38th Chinese Division, newly arrived from China, at the disposal of 1 Burcorps. On the morning of 18 April part of this division and an R.H.A. battery attacked the block north of the Pinchaung, but the attack went wide and failed to dislodge the enemy. 1 Burma Division attacked simultaneously on the south side and was also unsuccessful in bursting the block. Next day the Chinese and the artillery cleared the northern block. 1 Burma Division however was still held up on the south side and was now being attacked in the rear by a Japanese column which had come up behind them. It looked like the start of a rout. The only way the division could get by the block was to abandon its transport and scramble past on foot. Alexander ordered this to be done on the night of 19 April and by the next morning the division was across the Pinchaung. It had lost 'about 20 per cent. of its personnel, two Bofors, four 3.7 howitzers, four 25-pounders, most of its 3 inch mortars and nearly all its military transport'. However, it was through and got away northwards, unpursued for the moment because the Chinese division made a counter-attack and held up the Japanese.

1 Burma Division had a narrow escape. Its destruction would probably have involved, sooner or later, the destruction of 17 Division, then at Taungdwingyi, and so of the whole British army. As it was, the Japanese, having put all their available troops into the fight at Yenangaung, did not molest or attempt to cut off 17 Division and, the road northwards being open to it through Natmauk, it withdrew from its perilous position and rejoined 1

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Burma Division in the region of Meiktila. Thus 1 Burcorps was concentrated once more and able to continue its withdrawal towards Mandalay and the Ava bridge. By this date, 22-23 April, it was becoming doubtful whether Mandalay could be held. If it could not be held, the British army would have to cross the Irrawaddy and be ready, if necessary, to leave Burma at short notice. The condition of 1 Burma Division after its losses at the Pinchaung would alone have pointed to this course as the only prudent one. Moreover, the destruction of the oil fields meant that petrol henceforth was limited to existing stocks, which could not last more than a month. But the other factor, already noted, the Japanese sweep through the Shan States,<sup>1</sup> was decisive in this regard. Starting soon after the fall of Toungoo at the end of March, it had by this time gathered momentum. On 20 April a Japanese motorised column with tanks, after breaking through the Chinese 6th Army on the 18th, reached Loikaw, a Karen town just south of the Shan States border and on the road to Loilem and Lashio. This column, which threatened in a few days to outflank and cut off both Chinese armies and, incidentally to capture Maymyo, Alexander's headquarters, was the overriding factor in a situation, otherwise perilous enough, which gave him no alternative but to make ready to leave for India. Stilwell's comment in his diary for this day (20 April) reads: 'Are the British going to run out on us? Yes.'

We must now return to Maymyo and see how Dorman-Smith was affected by these last events. He had to make up his mind what to do. It was evident that the Civil Government, like the military, could not be maintained much longer at Maymyo. Arrangements were already under way to transfer what remained of the departments to Myitkyina, the most northerly town in Burma, some three hundred and fifty miles by rail from Maymyo, on the upper waters of the Irrawaddy. It had a landing ground of sorts, from which it was hoped to fly out as many people as possible, especially European women and children. It was not, however, well situated for those who might have to walk out, as it was two hundred and fifty miles north of the Tamu road. In its lat-

<sup>1</sup>See page 143, para. 2.

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itude was the Hukawng valley, an exit to India in name only, as it involved a march of a hundred and fifty miles (as the crow flies) to the Indian border over roadless mountains, unmapped and largely unexplored, uninhabited, foodless and rank with malaria, a route which would for a well equipped exploring expedition (in the fine season) have been quite an adventure, but which for straggling refugees in the monsoon (due 15 May) was going to be like entering the Valley of the Shadow of Death. Myitkyina, in fact, was a bad choice for a headquarters in the circumstances as they were to develop. The civil Government should have been transferred with the military to Shwebo and gone out with the soldiers over the Tamu pass. The mistake was due to the fact that Alexander had told Dorman-Smith on 1 April that he planned to send part of his forces through Myitkyina with the 5th Army, if it retired that way to China. The Civil Government and the refugees at Myitkyina would thus be protected and could leave with the troops. This plan was made before the Japanese began their turning movement through the Shan States, and was now out of date. But Dorman-Smith had not been kept *au courant* with the rapidly changing military situation. He still believed that the plan of 1 April held good and that Alexander and half his army would fall back on Myitkyina. He therefore continued with his preparations to make that town his headquarters and directed refugees to go there.

With events closing in the way they were, he was anxious to get Lady Dorman-Smith away safely to India, where their daughters were awaiting her arrival. She, however, was loath to go. She wanted to support him to the last and also to continue her work in the hospitals, which were full of wounded people. However, it was finally decided on 10 April that she should go ahead to Myitkyina. Her diary for that day has: 'Hear I am to move north on Tuesday. How horrible it all is. . . . Went to visit the air-raided victims in the hospital and found Sister Turner from Rangoon Dufferin (Hospital) there. Some awful cases. It is all so heartbreaking seeing those poor innocent people so tortured.' On 12 April she has: 'We have to leave tomorrow afternoon. The dogs and Miss Gibbs (the monkey) are going in a lorry. Finished

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packing.' She was taking with her what hospital comforts and stores she had for use in the hospital at Myitkyina. The entries which follow describe her journey to that town and illustrate very well how the administrative machine was running down, even in the area well north of the front. The grave events at Yenangyaung and the Japanese drive through the Shan States were still a week away when she left on 13 April. If at that date the wife of the Governor was exposed to such hardships, it can be imagined what travelling was to be like for ordinary people a fortnight later when the final collapse came. She first drove down to Mandalay. 'Fires still burning.' Crossed the Ava bridge over the Irrawaddy and reached Sagaing. Thence she drove the sixty miles to Shwebo, where she arrived at 7 p.m. 'plus the lorry, dogs and Miss Gibbs.' There was no road from Shwebo to Myitkyina, and she had here to take the train. Her special coach was in the station but there was no train or any news of one. The Burman Deputy Commissioner gave her dinner and afterwards she went to bed in the coach, the temperature still in the eighties. The lorry was loaded onto a railway truck. Next morning at 8 a.m. the train arrived, twelve hours late. 'They had been held up for lack of water in the engine. As the engine was filling up the syren went. That hurried matters and we left. Proceeded at the rate of 10 miles an hour until about 11.30 when we stopped, luckily in a forest.<sup>1</sup> No water, so the engine left us to go to the next filling up place. Two hours later we started off again, when we collapsed entirely and sat in a station the whole afternoon. The heat was terrific and I just poured. Miss Gibbs was tied onto the lorry and must have had some awful moments. What it was like in the crowded refugee coaches I can't imagine.' Starting again after dark the train slowly crept through the night, stopping frequently for one reason or another, sometimes for as long as three hours. They did not reach Myitkyina until 9 p.m. the following day, the rail journey of two hundred and fifty miles having taken them thirty-six hours.

Myitkyina is out of the tropics and comparatively cool. It

<sup>1</sup>The meaning here is that the forest gave some shade from the blazing sun of noon, and cover from Japanese aircraft.

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has charming river and mountain views. There, in a bungalow by the Irrawaddy bank, Lady Dorman-Smith settled down, determined to wait for her husband. The place was crammed with refugees, but planes were coming in only at intervals. Various high officials arrived and left for India. The Premier, Sir Paw Tun, and the Finance Minister, Sir Htoon Aung Gyaw, appeared on 22 April and caught a plane next day.<sup>1</sup> Lady Dorman-Smith busied herself with the hospital, gave the nuns in charge the comforts she had brought, and visited the poor refugees in their huts. Occasionally news of what was happening outside trickled through days late. The snows melted in the far valleys of Tibet and the great river rose silently; in silence flowed on to the battle in the south like a divinity from another sphere. At last she heard on the 27th that Dorman-Smith and his personal staff had left Maymyo and might be expected the next morning. Sure enough he arrived at 7 a.m., having been three nights on the way.

His last days in Maymyo had been spent in the task of trying with what few assistants he had left to keep a semblance of civil government alive in a country, threequarters overrun and lapsing into anarchy. Bad news arrived daily, though it was hard to be sure how bad it was. As the outflanking thrust up the Shan States seemed more serious than the pressure on the plain, Stilwell sent part of the 5th Army to help the remnant of the 6th which was attempting to hold the Japanese at Loikaw. It arrived too late. On the 22nd the Japanese were advancing north towards Hsipaw and Lashio with armoured forces and motorised infantry. That meant that they were within sixty miles of Loilem, the 6th Army's headquarters. On 25 April Alexander visited the Chinese headquarters on the plain, now at a point twenty-five miles south of Mandalay, and learned that the 5th Army was breaking up and 'was likely to collapse altogether very soon'. It was evidently time for him to be gone. He did not intend to be caught at the Ava bridge, as 17 Division was caught at the Sittang bridge, by leaving it too late, and now ordered 1 Burcorps to fall back and

<sup>1</sup>The other Ministers went into hiding in Burma. Except for the Karen Minister already mentioned, they survived and three of them rejoined Dorman-Smith in 1945.

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cross the Irrawaddy, 1 Burma Division by a ferry to be established at Sameikkon forty miles south of the bridge, and 17 Division by the bridge itself; the tanks also had to cross that way.

It would be outside the scope of this book to attempt a description of the moves and counter-moves taken by 1 Burcorps in the area beyond the river during the next few days. Suffice it to say that Alexander's chief anxiety was to keep open the road to India. The Chindwin flows into the Irrawaddy on the west of the region where 1 Burcorps now was to be. If the Japanese in their pursuit managed to get up the Chindwin, they would turn his flank and rear, for he had to cross that river in its upper reaches before he could get to the pass at Tamu. It was most important therefore to deny the Chindwin to the Japanese as long as possible.

\* Two results of first importance flowed from Alexander's decision to cross the Irrawaddy. The first was that the two Chinese armies would have to make their own way out of Burma. The remains of the 6th Army in the Shan States could escape eastwards, even if the Burma Road were cut at Lashio. But it was not so clear how the 5th Army on the plain would fare. It was too late for it to get out via Maymyo. There was no other exit unless it took to jungle paths to the Chinese frontier, wherever it could find them, by Bhamo or elsewhere. Alexander was sensitive to his obligations in this matter. For political reasons, besides common loyalty to allies, he wanted to avoid any appearance of deserting the Chinese. His plan of 1 April to send 17 Division and the Armoured Brigade north through Myitkyina had had as its chief object the protection of the 5th Army on a retreat to China. Though it was no longer possible to do this, he remained very anxious to help the Chinese in any way he could. He kept in close touch with Stilwell and offered asylum to the 5th Army in India or at least to that part of it which was still a coherent body. But here again the 'command business' prevented the quick decision which the circumstances required. By the time Chiang Kai-Shek had made up his mind, it was too late. The 5th Army had broken up, one remnant straggling to India by the Hukawng valley or by Homalin and another escaping in utter rout

## *The Nightmare*

to China by what mule tracks or village paths its stragglers could find.

The second result flowing from the military decision of 25 April is what concerns us particularly here. Alexander by his dispositions on the Chindwin and at Shwebo made it clear that he had by that date given up the idea he had previously dallied with that it was feasible to hold Burma north of Mandalay. For what reason, then, was Dorman-Smith going to Myitkyina, since to set up his headquarters in an area which the army intended to abandon was surely absurd? The answer has already been given: he did not learn of Alexander's change of plan until later. He believed that the plan communicated to him on 1 April still held and that part of the army would fall back on Myitkyina. On the morning of this same 25 April he was working as usual in a bungalow he used for an office about a mile from Government House at Maymyo. Suddenly in rushed the American Consul General, saying he had come to say good-bye.

'Are you off? What's happened?' asked Dorman-Smith.

'Why, haven't you heard? The Japs have cut the Lashio road.<sup>1</sup> They may be here tomorrow.'

This news took Dorman-Smith by surprise. He thought he had still time in hand. To make sure whether it was true, he sent his Liaison Officer, Wally Richmond, to what remained of Army Headquarters to enquire. The staff there couldn't tell, but thought it likely. (Actually Lashio was not occupied till four days later.) Richmond hurried to Government House, ordered lorries to be loaded with official papers, stores and luggage, and returned to tell Dorman-Smith: 'I think we ought to leave at once, H.E.'

Dorman-Smith, however, insisted on returning to Government House to go through his desk and make sure the Japanese got nothing important. There was the flag, too, to haul down. On reaching the house they found it deserted. And the walls were bare, curtains, pictures gone. The carpets too had disappeared, as had the spoons and forks. It was a shock that looting had begun

<sup>1</sup>The Lashio road was the Rangoon-Mandalay-Maymyo road to China, the famous Burma road. Lashio was a hundred miles N.E. but there were no troops covering Maymyo.

## *The Nightmare*

so quickly. By the time he had burnt his papers, it was lunch hour but they could find nothing to eat. An old Burmese messenger now put in an appearance. On being asked whether he could find them some food, he replied there was only his own lunch, which he would willingly share with them. So they sat down to their last meal in Government House, a dish of rice which they ate with their fingers.

On the way down the hill to Mandalay they met deserters from the 5th Army hastening up in the hope of getting through to China. When near the city, Dorman-Smith saw numbers of Buddhist monks in their yellow robes lying dead by the roadside. Chinese soldiers had shot them out of hand. They were in the habit of shooting any monk on sight, as spies sometimes disguised themselves in the yellow robe.

Mandalay had been bombed four times since the big raid on 3 April and was now quite blotted out. By a strange chance, however, the gaol had not been hit and the Thakin political prisoners, who had been collected there to the number of three hundred, were still in custody. Among them was Thakin Nu, the present Premier of Burma. He has published a light-hearted account of their sufferings in his *Burma under the Japanese*. It appears that on this same 25th April, he and some others, having been released on condition that they went to China, were driven in a prison van up the Maymyo road, the intention being to send them off by plane from Lashio. On hearing the news, however, that Lashio had fallen, the van turned round and brought them back to the prison. Dorman-Smith may have passed them on his way down. The passage in Thakin Nu's book, where he describes how he and the other politicals bribed the Chief Jailer next day to let them out is an amusing satire.

Unaware of how near was the man who one day would succeed him and the Raj, Dorman-Smith drove through the smouldering city and came to the Ava bridge, one of the large bridges of the world, for the Irrawaddy here is over a mile wide, a vast, deep and rapid stream. He crossed to Sagaing and stayed the night there with the Commissioner. The Minister, U Ba Yin, who had retired to a monastery on the Sagaing hills, called to pay his



## *The Nightmare*

respects, a touching gesture of regard for his chief at a moment of disillusion and defeat, when a lesser man would coldly have avoided him.

Next morning Dorman-Smith drove on to Shwebo and, abandoning his car, took the train for Myitkyina, where he was lucky to arrive safely thirty-six hours later, for a Japanese plane machine-gunned the train more than once. In passing through Shwebo he did not see Alexander, or any member of his staff<sup>1</sup>, and so reached Myitkyina still in ignorance that the British army was getting into position to leave by the Tamu road. He had, in fact, gone right into the blue, to a place written off by the army, and unprotected against the Japanese, which he could not get out of except by plane, if there was one, or on foot, if he could survive the Hukawng.

But, as we shall see, Burma was only to be governed for six days from Myitkyina.

<sup>1</sup>Alexander's headquarters were established that same day (26 April) at Shwebo, but he had probably not arrived from the front south of the river, where, as noted, he was conferring with Stilwell on the 25th.

## CHAPTER XVII

### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

When Dorman-Smith reached Myitkyina on the early morning of 28 April, he had with him there, besides his faithful wife, other faithfuls, his Counsellor, Wise, his military secretary, Miller, his A.D.C., Battersby, the stalwart Wally Richmond, Rossington, his secretary, Robin McGuire and Wilkie, Deputy Commissioners, and another Counsellor, MacDougall, all men of standing, experience and knowledge. Nevertheless, his sensation was of being cut off from his normal sources of information. 'I felt completely stranded,' he tells me. He had been used to having Alexander next door in Maymyo and personages of all sorts coming and going at his table, but here in a tiny country town at the back of beyond, a place which even in normal times had only one train a day, he was as out of the world as in an oasis. The administration, which had been gradually dissolving, had now ceased to exist. He was still Governor of Burma, but it was an appointment in the air. There was nothing he could do.

The place had daily been growing more crowded with refugees, who on military advice had been directed to come there, as it was supposed they could be evacuated by plane to India, the airfield being the only one left in Burma. Many of them were Anglo-Indian and Anglo-Burman subordinates from the various Government departments who had remained on duty till the last moment. They had their wives and children with them. But Dorman-Smith had no power to get them away. He did not control the planes which India might send. He did not control anything any longer. The truth was that he himself had become a refugee.

### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

In a letter written by Amery the previous day, which, of course, he did not receive until long after all was over, his chief had said: 'You have held your end up most valiantly. . . . I think I can tell you that Winston, in the course of a two hours' masterly speech on the whole strategic situation in last week's secret session, went out of his way to pay a really splendid tribute to your courage and cheerfulness<sup>1</sup>.' Could he have read that on the 28th, he would have felt less dispirited and forsaken.

On the 29th Lady Dorman-Smith notes: 'News still confused as to how far the Japs have got towards Lashio.' Dorman-Smith had by now discovered that the rumour of its fall was premature, though the enemy was near it. Next day, to pass the time, his wife and he, with Richmond and Battersby, drove in jeeps to the Confluence, where another great river, the Nmaikha, joins the Irrawaddy some twenty-eight miles north of the town. 'Wally and Eric tried to fish but no luck. Had a picnic lunch and then started back as it began to rain. Arrived to hear that the Japs were on the outskirts of Lashio,' she noted.

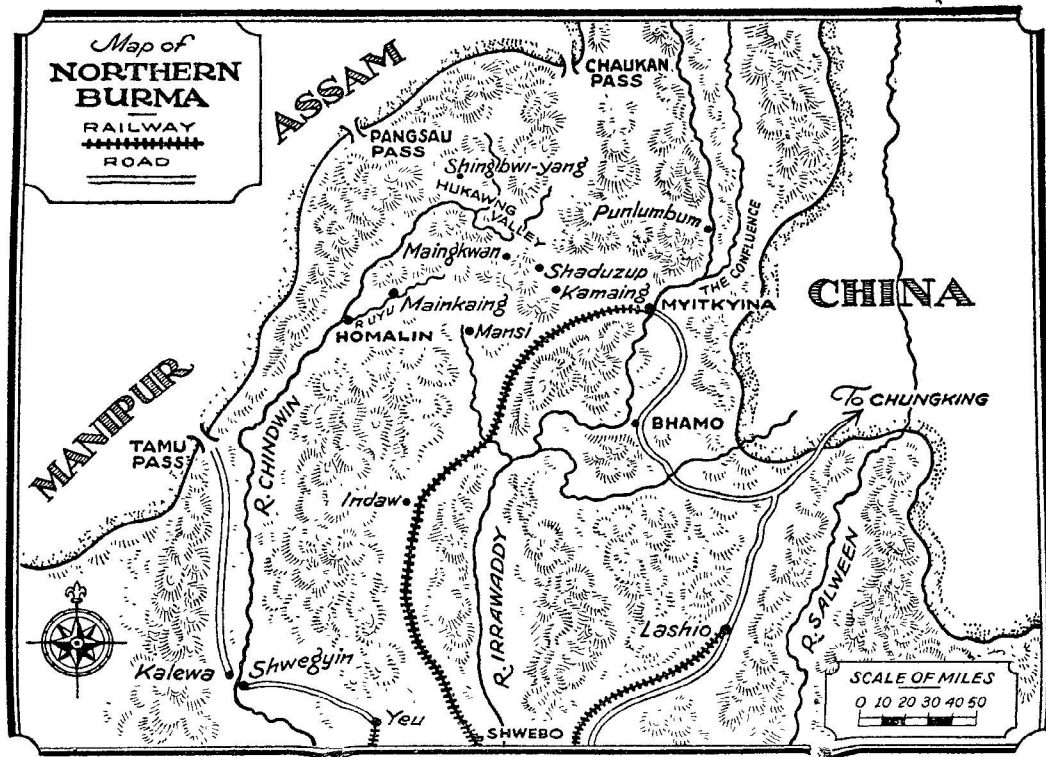
The point here is that when the Japanese reached Lashio they were on a motor road, some two hundred and twenty miles in length, which would take them via Bhamo to Myitkyina. As there were no troops to oppose them on the road, and at Myitkyina only one battalion of Frontier Force soldiers, who were already beginning to desert, they could occupy the town at their convenience. When Dorman-Smith set off there on the 25th it did not strike him that the fall of Lashio, already believed to have occurred, would be as fatal to Myitkyina as to Maymyo, because, as we know, he believed that Alexander and the army would be joining him there. But now, since there was no sign of the army nor renewed word of its coming, it became evident that his position was perilously exposed.

With the dangers thus in better focus, he saw that his wife ought to leave at once; indeed, that she should have gone already.

<sup>1</sup>Churchill said: 'In the midst of these scenes of indescribable misery and ruin, the Governor-General, whom we knew so well in this House as Minister of Agriculture a few years ago, and his devoted wife have been a fountain of courage and inspiration.' See p. 57, *Secret Session Speeches*.

Map of  
**NORTHERN  
BURMA**

RAILWAY  
+++++  
ROAD  
==



**CHINA**

To CHUNGKING

SCALE OF MILES

0 10 20 30 40 50

### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

And he immediately told her so. She notes under the same date: 'I got my orders to leave. Absolutely miserable. R. says he can't go and will retire into the jungle.'

Sitting at the Confluence and watching his staff fish, he had had time in the quiet of that lonely spot to reflect on what he should do. Was his situation that of the captain of a sinking ship? Ought he to go down with the ship of state which he commanded? But there was a false analogy here. Burma was sinking because the army was unable to prevent it; his job had not been to keep it afloat but to administer it. What then was his duty? Evidently to continue, as he had been doing since the administration collapsed, to endure alongside his officers and conduct himself with the dignity demanded by his position as the Crown's representative. Just as his deputy commissioners remained at the headquarters of their districts until just before they fell to the Japanese, so he must remain. Meanwhile, he should do everything in his power to get his staff safely away. But here a difficulty presented itself. He recoiled from the idea of flying out if they or some of them had to walk out. Yet he was incapable of walking out. He had chronic dysentery. No one knew at that time how stiff an ordeal even for the fittest the Hukawng valley would be, but at least it was estimated to be a three weeks' walk with no accommodation and little food en route. Were he to attempt such a journey he would soon fall ill and, by impeding his companions, endanger their lives. Yet so averse was he to flying and leaving them to walk that he felt he must go on foot till he dropped, when he might persuade them to leave him and go on. He could perhaps lie up in the jungle somewhere. Two of his Ministers on parting from him at Maymyo had asked for a rifle and ammunition and declared they would hide in a friendly village till the British returned. Since it was physically impossible for him to walk out, he too would stay concealed somewhere. That was his idea when he told his wife on 30 April that he would 'retire into the jungle'.

The following day he seems to have perceived the futility of this, for a Governor cannot lie hid in a jungle without everyone knowing it and he would certainly be found and taken prisoner

### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

by the Japanese, a trophy they would be happy to add to the rest. It was clearly his duty to leave. However, taking a seat in a plane was still so repugnant to him that he returned to the idea of trying to walk out. Accordingly he wired Amery that evening: 'With the Japanese in Lashio our position does not look too good. I hope to get my wife off tomorrow. As for myself I feel that I must stay on and take my chance with the host of people who may be left. I propose to move from here to Kamaing whence there is some sort of a land route to India.' Kamaing, towards the entrance to the Hukawng, was a village fifty miles west and could be reached by jeep.

These particulars show that by 1 May Dorman-Smith had guessed that the game was up. He had gone to Myitkyina, because it was understood between him and Alexander that at least part of his army would withdraw towards China by that route and take him along with them. He still had not heard that this was no longer the military plan; did not know that the 5th Chinese Army was broken; and had not been informed of Alexander's preparations to leave for India. Nevertheless, with the fall of Lashio, it was now hardly probable that Alexander could come. It was time, therefore, for all those able to walk to India to leave for the Hukawng. Those unable to walk, women, children, the old, invalids, could, he hoped, be got away by plane. But he himself would not take a plane. Anyhow, at Kamaing, where he was going, there was no airfield and once there he would have to walk.

We must now look at what was happening in Shwebo, where Alexander had established his headquarters on 26 April. His intention was to remain there if possible for a week, before starting to march towards the Tamu pass, in order to give his commissariat time to stock the road. But the Japanese began to exert more pressure than he expected in the Chindwin valley. It became clear that he could not wait a week without running too great a risk of being outflanked and cut off. On 30 April he held a consultation with Stilwell at Shwebo. The American admitted that the British General had no choice. If he was to get out, he must leave at once. Stilwell himself was uncertain of his plans. With the

### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

disruption of the 5th Army, his control of it, never complete, was yet further reduced. Lo and Tu were doing what they liked and also intriguing against each other. His diary note for this day has the sentence: 'Imminent danger of disintegration and collapse.' The consultation lasted far into the night and was stormy at times, for it was a moment of great anxiety for both Generals. However, agreement was reached at last. The British army would start its movement towards the pass next day. The Ava bridge was blown at midnight.

Mr Hughes, whose appointment as Civil Liaison Officer has already been mentioned, was present at this meeting. He had no previous knowledge of the intended withdrawal to India, as Alexander's change of plan on the 25th was, of course, kept secret. The decision that the army should immediately start to march out of Burma was a complete surprise to him. It was evident that he must send Dorman-Smith news of the change. As Liaison Officer his duty was both to the G.O.C. and the Governor. He knew Dorman-Smith had gone to Myitkyina thinking that Alexander was coming north. Now Lady Dorman-Smith and he would be left in the lurch two hundred and fifty miles away in the jungle. He says:<sup>1</sup> 'F. B. Arnold of my service (the I.C.S.) was in Shwebo. As soon as it was light on 1 May I went to him and asked him to go with all speed to Myitkyina and deliver to H.E. a letter I had written describing the change of plan at the conference. After he had left I reported to General Winterton<sup>2</sup> what I had done. The General was angry. I had been most indiscreet, he said. The safety of the whole army depended on their move west being kept absolutely secret. He immediately sent a wireless signal informing H.E. that if he received a message alleging the departure west of the army he should disregard it. Having done so he reported me to General Alexander. The General sent for me. On my representing to him that to keep my chief in the dark over a matter which so vitally concerned his safety was contrary to all honour and also to my plain duty as his

<sup>1</sup>*The Hughes Papers.*

<sup>2</sup>Major General T. J. W. Winterton had recently succeeded Lieut-General Hutton as Chief of Staff.

### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

Liaison Officer, he agreed that I had acted properly and sent a signal to inform H.E. that the earlier signal was incorrect, for the army, in fact, was leaving for India.'

It seems that Dorman-Smith did not receive this second signal and Hughes' letter until the late afternoon of 2 May. In the morning, as Lady Dorman-Smith records in her diary, Mr Edmeades of Steel Brothers, the forest firm, who was on refugee duty on the Hukawng valley route, came in and said that it was quite impossible for the Governor to walk out that way. 'So he will have to fly,' she adds, 'which is a great relief to me.' Evidently the account which Mr Edmeades gave of the valley finally convinced him that to walk out would be suicide, and he became more reconciled to the idea of flying. But when a transport plane came in at three o'clock, he refused to go with his wife. She, Sir John Wise, and Geoffrey Miller, who had only one leg, were put on board. This was the third time she had had to part with him, each time the circumstances being more alarming. But though she had to leave him behind in Burma, he had at least agreed to fly out. Her entry for the day (2 May) ends: 'Arrived Dum Dum (Calcutta) about 7.30. . . . A plane is going over to fetch Reg tomorrow.' She wrote thus confidently because, as we shall learn, Air Vice Marshal Stevenson, lately G.O.C. Air Burma, and a good friend, on hearing that Dorman-Smith had remained in Myitkyina, determined to rescue him.

Soon after she had left, Alexander's signal and Hughes' letter came in. On learning that Alexander had changed his plans and was already heading for India, Dorman-Smith decided to lay his case before the Cabinet for their decision. He wired to Amery immediately, stating he had been advised that he could not survive a walk out through the Hukawng, that as Alexander was leaving by the Tamu pass no troops would now be coming to cover Myitkyina, and adding: 'If I have to clear out, air seems the only way. I do not wish to take up a seat which could be used by a refugee, but I believe there is a Blenheim in India which might be sent. May I have your advice urgently.' If a plane, which would not otherwise be sent, was sent, no refugee would be the loser.

To return now to Calcutta. On landing, Lady Dorman-Smith



### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

had gone to Government House with Wise and Miller. Hearing that she had arrived, Air Vice Marshal Stevenson immediately called. Before leaving Burma in March he had promised Dorman-Smith to fly over and get him out, should it ever be necessary. A glance at Lady Dorman-Smith and a word with Wise and Miller were enough to tell him that the moment had come to keep his promise. He told them he would send a plane and left to see about it. On getting to his headquarters he sent for Squadron Leader Davey and Flight Lieutenant Gill and ordered them to fly his own Hudson to Myitkyina next day (3 May) and fetch Dorman-Smith. That he had wired to Whitehall for orders, he knew, since the wire, repeated to the Viceroy, had been shown to him, but that made no difference. He was not going to wait for Whitehall's reply. Before it came Myitkyina might be overrun. As a comrade and friend, this was a moment, if ever there was one, to act with speed and the best he had. It entered his head, however, that Dorman-Smith, since he had referred to Whitehall, might refuse to leave in anticipation of orders. 'If he refuses,' he is alleged to have said to the two pilots, 'you boys will know how to bring him along.' And he gave them a letter: 'My dear Sir Reginald, I have seen John Wise and Miller. . . . I am sending my Hudson. . . . They (the pilots) should land at Myitkyina at dusk tomorrow and will lift you out at dawn on 4 May. I would ask you to accompany them. . . . Your wife arrived safely. God bless you and I wish I could come myself.' All this was arranged and written between Lady Dorman-Smith's arrival at Calcutta at 7.30 p.m. and midnight, for the letter is dated 2 May.

Dorman-Smith writes: 'On the evening of 3 May I was having a gin, when my secretary, Mr M. Rossington, informed me that some R.A.F. people wished to speak to me. Two tough-looking lads came in and said they had just arrived from Calcutta with instructions from A. V. M. Donald Stevenson to fly me out. I told them that I would see they returned full but that I myself could not come as I had had no orders to leave Burma. While we were arguing about this, Rossington hurried in to say that a *most immediate* telegram had just arrived and asked me to help him to decipher it.'

## *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

It was from Churchill and ran: 'If and when you feel you can do no good by remaining, as now seems to be the case, you should return by air to India and report there to Secretary of State. You should make best arrangements possible for your staff. Every effort will be made to send Blenheim or other aircraft. The above is to be taken as an order.'

That settled it. Dorman-Smith felt it was undeniable that he could do no more in Burma. There were about a thousand Anglo-Indian women and children waiting to be flown out, but he hoped to serve them better by himself pressing in India for their immediate rescue than by staying with them in Myitkyina.<sup>1</sup> At dawn next day he left Myitkyina in the Hudson, taking with him his second Counsellor, Sir Raibeart MacDougall, his secretary, Mr Rossington, a Bengali clerk too feeble to walk, Battersby's Indian servant, and two aged Anglo-Indian refugees. Lady Dorman-Smith was waiting for him at Calcutta. 'Reg arrived here about 9.30 a.m. looking very worn out. He brought no luggage, only a suitcase. So that's the end of all our possessions<sup>2</sup>.' She adds that Wally Richmond had started the day before to walk the Hukawng, taking Miss Gibbs and Jess (a bull terrier), and some remaining Government House servants. The other dogs had to be destroyed, because they were too old to stand the long trek.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Battersby and the others who were young and fit enough to walk the Hukawng elected to wait until the Japanese were near the town and on 5 and 6 May succeeded in getting off many of the Anglo-Indian women and children on the planes which came in. The remainder were placed in charge of the nuns of the Catholic mission who had decided to stay. The Japanese, who entered Myitkyina on 8 May, do not seem to have harmed them. There was one Englishwoman among them, Mrs. Erskine Childers. She was interned later. All the refugees who could walk left on 7 May.

<sup>2</sup>Dorman-Smith was accused afterwards of filling the plane with his luggage. Actually his one suitcase was only half full because to enable the plane to take the two aged refugees, the others had to discard half their things. He left his evening clothes behind and before dining at the Viceregal table the following night had to borrow dinner clothes from the Viceroy's valet.

<sup>3</sup>Lady Dorman-Smith records that Richmond reached Delhi on 27 May. He had brought out a party numbering 108 without casualty. Miss Gibbs, however, died two days after arrival from exhaustion.

### *Dorman-Smith leaves Burma*

Dorman-Smith did not remain in Calcutta but hurried next day in a bomber to Delhi with the object of organising a last minute airlift for the refugees at Myitkyina. His wife followed by train. She found him 'feeling awful'. However on 7 May he received a telegram from King George VI which must have been a great solace. 'I deeply regret the circumstances which made it necessary for you to be ordered to withdraw from Burma, but I would like you to know how greatly I have admired your courageous spirit during these times of grave anxiety and peril. I know that you did everything that was humanly possible in the face of overwhelming difficulties.'

## CHAPTER XVIII

### *The British evacuate Burma*

**T**he reader will not wish me to end this part of the book without some description of how those who walked out of Burma fared, in particular Alexander and the Imperial Army, Joseph Stilwell, and the refugees who went by the Hukawng valley.

The conference of 30 April at Shwebo, which decided on the withdrawal of the British forces, lasted until late. When it was over, Alexander, after telling his staff officers to get out the necessary orders for the commanders in the field, went to bed. Next morning, Mr Hughes tells me, he was down, fresh, shaved, gay as usual, his uniform spotless, and smiling at his exhausted staff, some of whom had only just finished their work, rubbed his hands and asked hungrily: 'What are we going to have for breakfast?'

But though such was the *sang froid* of this great Irishman, it was truly touch and go. He writes in his despatch: 'The operations had now developed into a race with the enemy for the possession of Kalewa.' Kalewa was the little town on the Chindwin where the river would have to be crossed by ferry. The Japanese were at Monywa on the lower Chindwin and if their troops, carried up river by launches, reached the ferry first, the British would be cut off from India. It was about a hundred and ten miles from Shwebo to Kalewa. 'The road was nothing more than a sandy track,' he goes on, as it had not been possible to get it metalled in time. One portion was intersected by countless deep river beds, some dry and some with water at the bottom. There was also 'a difficult hill section with many rickety bridges constructed only of brushwood or

## *The British evacuate Burma*

bamboo. Anyone seeing this track for the first time would find it difficult to imagine how a fully mechanised force could possibly move over it'. Worse still, it petered out twelve miles short of Kalewa and became a mere footpath through the jungle. The tanks of the Armoured Brigade would have to be abandoned there, as would all the larger motor vehicles. The road, however, had been stocked with food, thanks 'to the heroic efforts of the Administrative staff'.<sup>1</sup>

The movement towards Kalewa began on 1 May. 1 Burcorps, strung out in a long line of motor transport, crossed the dusty plain of Shwebo and the jungle hills bounding the Chindwin valley. There was a large number of refugees on the road, whom the troops did their best to help. These consisted not only of Indians, but also of Anglo-Indians, Anglo-Burmans, some Chinese and Europeans, and Burmese women, wives of the foregoing. I have heard it said that the Burmese women remained indefatigably cheerful and on getting to camp would sit up all night playing cards. It was a terribly bumpy road for the wounded, whose numbers are given as 2,300. 'They endured great suffering,' writes Alexander, 'but it was better that they should endure this than be left behind. Fortunately the enemy did not follow up closely.' The army reached the Chindwin in the neighbourhood of Shwegyin, the point where the road stopped. Six steamers, each with a capacity of 700 men, were waiting there. These vessels took some troops, but were chiefly used to carry the wounded, equipment and ammunition over to Kalewa, twelve miles upstream. After destroying the tanks and most of the transport, the rest of the army marched on foot to the ferry opposite Kalewa and got across there in smaller boats. While this was going on, the Japanese, hastening up the Chindwin in launches, reached Shwegyin, but were beaten off. By 14 May the whole army was over the river.

In this short account we should not forget 2 Burma Brigade,

<sup>1</sup>General Alexander's Despatch, para. 69. Why this road, the sole exit from Burma, had not been metalled and bridged has been explained. It was too late to do anything when the decision to build it was taken. Events moved too quickly.

## *The British evacuate Burma*

which had been marching up the west bank of the Irrawaddy as flank guard and, after that river's confluence with the Chindwin, continued northwards on the far side of the Chindwin along a track through the Myittha valley, their duty being to prevent a Japanese secondary outflanking thrust up the valley to Kalewa. By 2 May, the brigade had footslogged some two hundred and sixty miles and was still one hundred and sixty-five miles short of Kalewa. Though generally in communication by wireless with the forces on the east bank, the troops would sometimes be out of touch for days and, since they were marching through country unknown to them, had like Xenophon's Ten Thousand the feeling of being swallowed in the vastness of Asia. On this 2nd May, when striving to hear corps signals, an atmospheric freak gave them London instead. What was their amazement when they heard the Archbishop of Canterbury praying for them, praying that the army might come safely out of Burma! The Brigade Commander, Brigadier Bourke, who told me this story, said that throughout the long march, they experienced nothing but kindness in the Burmese villages through which they passed, except at Pakokku, a Thakin stronghold, where the people looked askance at them. He had bought three hundred and fifty bullock carts and seven hundred bullocks to carry his equipment, ammunition and casualties, and engaged local men to drive, which he could never have done, had the population been as hostile as some military officers erroneously believed. Nor could he have made these purchases, hired labour and bought food except for the lucky chance that, when near Toungoo in March, the Burmese magistrate of Nyaunglebin, before the town was evacuated, had handed to him the contents of the sub-treasury. The brigade had been using these funds to pay its way ever since it started from the Prome area on 5 April. At last, on 14 May, it rejoined 1 Bur-corps in the neighbourhood of Kalewa, after having covered a total distance of four hundred and twenty-five miles. 'This long indomitable march,' writes Compton Mackenzie in his *Eastern Epic*, 'was one of the notable feats of the Second World War.' Only eighty men had to be treated in hospital at the end of it, further testimony to the efficiency of the command.

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Once safely over the Chindwin at Kalewa, 1 Burcorps, assisted by transport sent from 4 Corps in India, covered the remaining seventy miles to the frontier without mishap.<sup>1</sup> Here it was a race against the monsoon, which was due to break any day and whose downpours would have turned the road into a morass and made the lot of the troops as wretched as was to be that of the refugees in the Hukawng when they were overtaken by the rain. So the long withdrawal came to a close, the troops weary but not exhausted, marching steadily from camp to camp, as established by 4 Corps for their reception, the rearguard holding off the pursuing Japanese. The narrative part of Alexander's despatch ends with this lapidary sentence, as terse as a Roman inscription: 'At 1800 hours on the 20th of May I placed the rearguard of 1 Burcorps under command of 4 Corps and my task came to an end.' He passed on to other labours which, as the tide of fortune turned, won him the renown of a victorious General, yet not more true glory than he had earned in leading his men from the block at Taukkyan to the pass at Tamu.

We must now see how General Stilwell got out. After the conference on 30 April he was at a loss what to do. His command over the Chinese armies had evaporated. The Generals had now taken charge. A plane from China came into Shwebo on the morning of 1 May bound for Calcutta and he sent away in it the bulk of his headquarters personnel. The following day he left with his personal staff and drove in jeeps northward, apparently with the object of reaching Myitkyina, perhaps to fly out from there, if he found that he could do no more for the Chinese. He had to drive, as trains had ceased to run, but the road, a mere bullock-cart track with deep ruts, was almost impossible even for jeeps. Thus he made slow progress and did not reach Wuntho, a hundred miles north, until 3 May. There he met Lo,<sup>2</sup> the

<sup>1</sup>The Indian authorities had made a fair job of the road on their side. They had no labour difficulties and no invasion to prevent them, as the Burma authorities had.

<sup>2</sup>A day or so later Lo got away by plane to India, leaving the 5th and 6th armies under his command to escape as best they could; General Tu reached China and retained his rank there in spite of all.

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C.-in-C. of the Chinese armies. So demoralised did the Chinese command seem that Stilwell noted: 'It is now apparent that we can no longer be of much use. . . . Decided to take our crowd out.' He was still thinking of Myitkyina and its airfield, and hoped to find an engine and carriages somewhere on the railway track which would carry him there. If not, he would strike west across country for the frontier.

Next day he set out north again with his jeeps, but the track was so atrocious that he did only fifty miles. On 5 May he reached Indaw. There he learnt that no train could get to Myitkyina as the line was blocked. He therefore decided to make for the Chindwin. He had been joined *en route* by Dr. Seagrave<sup>1</sup> and the whole of his staff of Kachin, Karen and Shan nurses. The party now amounted to about a hundred persons, a third of whom were Americans. From Indaw there was a motorable road as far as Mansi, a village fifty miles N.W. They reached Mansi on the 6th and destroyed the jeeps, as it was impossible to drive further. The walk started. Three days' march through the jungle took them to Maingkaing, a village on the Uyu river, a tributary of the Chindwin. There they built rafts and slowly poling down stream arrived on 12 May at Homalin, which is a hundred and twenty miles north of Kalewa and sixty miles of Tamu. It was deserted. Next day they crossed the river in dugouts and set their faces towards the mountains which lay between them and India. There was no recognised exit from Burma that way, but footpaths led from village to village. It was the Naga country, inhabited by half wild tribes, but pleasant people as they found. 'Greeted by headman in brilliant red blanket, with bottle of rice beer. Had tea and crackers. Headman of last village presented me with a goat. I reciprocated with cigarettes.' So Stilwell's diary. It was stiff walking, but they were in better training than when they started. Moreover, Seagrave's nurses were so cheerful and obliging, singing and laughing as if on a picnic, that they were wonder-

<sup>1</sup>Dr Seagrave was an American. For some years he had been in charge of a hospital at Nam Hkan in the Northern Shan States, which had been founded by Dr Harper, an American Baptist, and was a great boon to the local people.



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ful companions and gave the men heart. Their charm and bravery figure largely in two books which describe the march, Jack Belden's *Retreat with Stilwell*, and Seagrave's own book, *Burma Surgeon*. On 14 May, the eighth day after leaving the jeeps, they were met by a British party sent to help them, with ponies, a doctor and food. Their anxieties were over and they reached Imphal, army headquarters, safely on 20 May, about the same time as did Alexander.<sup>1</sup> Stilwell's statement to the Associated Press was: 'I claim we got a hell of a beating. We got run out of Burma and it is as humiliating as hell. I think we ought to find out what caused it, go back and retake it.'

The refugees, who walked to India from Myitkyina by the Hukawng route, suffered much more than those who went via Tamu, where food, shelters, doctors and even some transport were available and the monsoon had not yet broken. By the Hukawng, camps and stocks of food were insufficient; and the monsoon broke over the refugees. What it is like to be drenched in the monsoon when marching through a tract of jungle-covered mountains two hundred and fifty miles wide is difficult for us here to imagine. It means mud to the knees on the level, slippery ascents hardly possible to climb, malaria in its worst forms, dysentery, assault by leeches (both the ordinary and the brown tiger breed) that drop from the trees, start from the grass, reach out from the bushes, and by sandflies, a worse torture than mosquitoes. It means, too, streams that become cataracts and cannot be crossed; nights in soaking clothes in a dripping lean-to; impossibility often of lighting a fire; and a cruel depression of spirits. The surest way of surviving the Hukawng was to form a party, carry reserves of food and some medicine; have a trusted man in charge; keep to schedule; hold together. An unorganised group or individuals had much less chance.

One of the officers who remained behind after Dorman-Smith's departure on 4 May was, as stated, his A.D.C., Eric Battersby. He joined a party of seventeen headed by the deputy commissioner of Myitkyina, Robin McGuire, and has given me his diary of the

<sup>1</sup>Some troops of the 5th Army followed them out by this route to India, but Stilwell was not in touch with them.

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march out. I will dip into it here and there to show how such party, even though well led by a man who at least knew something of the terrain and had made preparations for the march, had great difficulty in getting through.

They left on 7 May when the Japanese were only a few miles from Myitkyina and motored north to Maitawng at mile 102 on the Sumprabum road, from where their walk of two hundred and fifty miles began. There were five women, ten men from the civil services, and two servants. From Maitawng to Maingkwan at the entrance of the Hukawng valley was a hundred miles and lay over a series of steep ridges, the highest of which, called the Daru pass, was four thousand feet high. 'Our progress in consequence was extremely slow. The two or three hundred people who had started earlier in the day (10 May) churned up the mud. . . . After eight hours walking only seven miles had been accomplished.' At that rate it was going to take thirty-six days for the journey. Could they stand the strain and exposure of five weeks' marching? Would food be forthcoming? McGuire had managed to secure some coolies to carry the baggage, but they did not promise to go far, and had to be paid ten times the usual wage to go at all.

Sometimes the party walked along ridges when 'tree clad mountains intercepted by deep valleys rolled away as far as the eye could see'. In the valleys, shut off from any view and able to see only a few yards ahead, they 'seemed enfolded in the arms of the mountains'. It was Kachin country and at first they managed to find a village at the end of each day's march. Most of the villages were empty, because armed deserters both from the Chinese and Imperial army had passed that way and terrified the Kachins by their violent behaviour.

By the fourth day one of the party, a Mr Nell of the Public Works, developed a septic foot and his leg swelled. He would either have had to be carried or left to die, had not McGuire managed to buy a bullock and put him on it. At this point they ran into a large force of Chinese soldiers, ugly customers, who after looting the provisions which had been stored for refugees at Maingkwan, the village for which the British party was heading, had apparently turned back and were making east for China. On

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the ninth day of the march (19 May) they reached Maingkwan. No provisions remained there except some rice.

The coolies refused to go beyond this village, but McGuire managed to buy bullocks to carry the food, blankets and medicines. They now entered the Hukawng proper. 'It was raining . . . the road was a sea of mud. . . . On either side was dark dripping jungle. . . . We met more refugees at this part. The majority were old people, frequently with young children, moving slowly and with difficulty.' There was a cart track on this section and they here came on a convoy of ten bullock carts which a philanthropist had organised to pick up those who fell by the way. He had food and medicine and was caring for them. Mr Nell, who was now dangerously ill, was confided to this Good Samaritan. That night the village they came to was full of corpses. 'We went to sleep thoroughly frightened,' for the dead had died of cholera.

Next day 'the road grew worse at every step. It rained the whole day and every mile or so the corpse of some wretched under-nourished creature who had died of exhaustion could be seen'.

From the terror and loneliness of this jungle they reached three days later two ferries, one over the upper waters of the Chindwin and the other over a large tributary. At the second they met Mr Arnold of the Indian Civil Service, who was managing the ferry. This was a great relief for he was able to give them precise information about the route ahead and what food they might expect to find. McGuire thought it his duty to remain at the ferry and help Arnold with the refugees<sup>1</sup>, an heroic renunciation. The party went on, saddened by his absence. The valley became yet more macabre. 'There were plenty of dead bodies on the side of the road, but worse than these were the people tottering along or sitting by the wayside suffering from pneumonia and exhaustion.' The party was helpless to assist these unfortunates and could do nothing but pass on.

<sup>1</sup>Two thousand refugees were crossing daily at this time. The military deserters behaved like an armed rabble, threatening and fighting for places in the dugouts, one of which was sunk by rifle fire. (Professor Pearn's Report).

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Two days' further walking brought them to the village of Shing-bwi-yang, where planes from India were dropping food and medicine. They rested two days and set out again, fully re-provisioned. It was now 27 May. The next section, of some eighty miles, was more hilly country, and the worst part of the journey. There were no villages or huts to camp in, no stocks of food, no officers on duty. The monsoon now was fully set. All they had for shelter was a parachute. Seven days they toiled up and down endless hills, sleeping at night in the rain. At last on 2 June at the foot of the Pangsau pass on the frontier they met with some Assam planters sent to search for refugees by the Indian Tea Association, which had organised camps on their side of the frontier and with great devotion were setting to work to rescue those struggling through the Hukawng.

These excellent people now took charge, and the party, after crossing the Pangsau pass (4,000 feet), continued from one well-provisioned and comfortable camp to the next, till they reached railhead in India on 10 June, the march having taken exactly a month at the average pace of eight miles a day. They had come through without a death, though all were exhausted and suffering from malaria or dysentery. Had the Assam Planters not met and succoured them for the last week, they could hardly have survived.

Such were the experiences of a group of British, enjoying great advantages over the average travellers. Of the desperate plight of the refugees in general Professor Pearn's report, already cited, provides the most vivid glimpses. For instance, he quotes the following account, written by an Englishman, whom he does not name, of what the refugees suffered on the bad section of the road after Shing-bwi-yang. 'About half a day's march was over when it began to rain. We had just begun a climb of 3,000 feet. We thought in the plains that the hill path would be steep but at least we expected some rest from the dreadful mud. We were quite wrong. The mud was never as deep but in other ways it was much worse. After the first thousand feet we began to see pack bullocks exhausted and left by the side of the path to die. And then we saw elderly men and women standing weeping at difficult corners which they had not the strength to go round.

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Then as we climbed further we came across dead animals and dying people<sup>1</sup>. The writer describes how he climbed over the top and down into the valley, to breast the next climb. 'Soon it was the same thing again, people weeping from weariness and despair. One pair we saw where the elderly man had just died and his younger companion was wrapping himself in his blanket when we passed, to die in the same place. . . . At one corner I tried four times to get round, finally clawing up on hands and knees.'

These lost weeping creatures remind one of scenes in the *Inferno*.

The behaviour of military deserters or stragglers added horror to the already horrible passage. Professor Pearn says: 'They looted everywhere and everything. Those who had ponies broke into the Kachins' barns and scattered paddy on the floor as fodder for the animals. They robbed refugees and in some cases murdered those who resisted. These troops were so dangerous that a Brigadier, asked at the ferry to leave an officer to restrain them, refused saying it would merely be asking to be murdered.'<sup>2</sup>

The fact was that nearly everyone was distraught with misery and half demented. Professor Pearn writes: 'Few of the refugees had any experience of jungle life, and the wild and inhospitable hills must have filled them with terror. . . . The longer the journey lasted, the more the strain began to tell. . . . If a member of a party fell by the wayside he was left; husbands deserted wives who could not maintain the pace, sons deserted parents, even mothers deserted children.'

But in the midst of these degradations there were many examples of nobility, and it fell to a child to furnish the brightest. Pearn quotes the following: 'A small boy of 14,<sup>3</sup> after the death

<sup>1</sup>Bluebottle flies laid eggs on the dying and clouds of butterflies hovered round the dead.

<sup>2</sup>The reader may be surprised that there were British and Indian deserters and stragglers so far north. The explanation in part is that there were detachments which had been guarding towns in the north. There was, as mentioned, a Frontier Force battalion at Myitkyina. There were also men from hospitals. The Chinese were 5th Army troops.

<sup>3</sup>His name was Norman Richardson.

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of his mother, brought safely over a hundred miles of the route three out of his five brothers and sisters. He carried a baby eleven months old for a week until it died, and on arrival at camps would not only scramble for rations but would return two or three miles down the track to assist his grandmother to get in.'

The Chinese in their classic stories of filial piety have hardly bettered this. The Buddha, in the Jataka tales of his previous existences, advanced to Enlightenment by such acts of compassion. I do not know whether this saintly boy ever received a reward or a medal from the Government and confess I do not care because I don't think anything could have added to the honour he had already won.

Moved by the miseries and grandeurs of the Hukawng, Dorman-Smith wrote in a report to Amery: 'The terrible trek . . . is at once a story of great disaster and great achievement, of great heroism and great cruelty, animal selfishness and immortal chivalry.' But the cowards and the violent were a minority. 'In the main, the ordinary man and woman, many of them unaccustomed to walking long distances, unacquainted with and afraid of jungle travel, badly equipped for many weeks on the road, showed a courage beyond praise.' And of these ordinary men and women he adds: 'It fills me with a sense of gratitude that I am privileged if not to know them personally, at least to know of them, and to pay tribute to them here.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>In this short account, written not to compass the subject but to balance the main narrative, the names of other heroes and their deeds have had to be omitted. Yet, if only in a note, Mr B. W. North of the Burma Frontier Service must be mentioned, for he stayed in the valley throughout the monsoon until every surviving refugee was rescued and brought in, (a total of about 20,000). By universal consent he did more to help than any other man. It has, moreover, been impossible to refer to what happened on the Chaukan pass (8,000 feet) further north, over which some two hundred and fifty people escaped, a more terrible journey even than by the Hukawng. But Geoffrey Tyson in his *Forgotten Frontier* has written of this. There was yet another pass in the extreme north, the Diphu (14,000 feet), used by one man, the celebrated explorer and botanist, Kingdon Ward, who starting from Putao, above Sumprabum, on 15 May, walked four hundred miles via Rima on the Tibetan border and reached civilisation at Sadiye in Assam two months later. But he had done that sort of thing all his life.

## CHAPTER XIX

### *Implications of the British Defeat*

WE may take breath a moment and try to draw some general conclusions. A quantity of events, covering twelve months, have been fitted together in chronological sequence. What do they amount to? What exactly has happened?

The most obvious is the loss of one of the Empire's possessions in Asia, the first loss of consequence since Britain started acquiring territory there in the seventeenth century. In World War One she would have lost the whole Empire if Germany had defeated her. But she defended herself successfully in her home lands and this sufficed to protect her outlying possessions. In World War Two, however, she was attacked both at the centre and the periphery. In her then state of unpreparedness this inevitably entailed the loss of Asian possessions, a loss which would be temporary if she won at the centre. In that case, the conquest of Burma by the Japanese would turn out to be not much more than a raid.

But if the loss of Burma was likely to be a mere episode it nevertheless troubled the British. We had always contended that we amply fulfilled our obligations towards the races brought under our sway by giving them internal law and order and externally protecting them from aggression. These substantial gifts compensated them for the political independence we took away. In the case of Burma, however, we neglected these obligations when we let the defence of the country slide, so that, when the test came, we could not save it from being overrun and devastated. The Burmese trusted us but we let them down. That was how

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many English people felt. It was certainly Dorman-Smith's dominant feeling. His strongest desire henceforth was to make up to them for the sufferings they had had to bear because of the failure to foresee in time the Japanese invasion and take adequate measures to prevent it. After driving out the invaders, we must restore the country to its former prosperity, compensating the inhabitants in every possible way and thereby regaining their trust and regard. This aspiration reflected what was best in British character. It gave us a motive higher than the mere avenging of a defeat and the restoration of our prestige.

But the problem was not so simple as this because we no longer believed that what we could give an Asian territory in the way of a sound administration and protection from enemies compensated it for the loss of political liberty. We had ceased to be sure of our mission as a civilising imperial power. The restoration of the country would not be enough. British scepticism in this regard can be attributed to our evident failure to impose ourselves on Asiatics as superior beings. It never became the ambition of the Indians or the Burmese to be thought of as British, as it certainly was under the Roman Empire, not only of the Barbarians but of the inhabitants of the Near East, to be taken for Romans. The races of the Orient held a measured view of what had happened since Vasco da Gama landed in India in 1498. Though delighted with western inventions and particularly western medicine, they preferred their own culture to ours. This universal refusal of Asia to take more from the West than technology undermined western self-confidence. With the inhabitants of India and Burma doubtful of Britain's civilising mission and no longer satisfied with a bargain, where they surrendered political independence for the advantage of being British subjects, our presence there in a ruling capacity had a less cogent meaning for us. Their demand for political enfranchisement began to seem reasonable. We no longer found it difficult to understand, and even adopted it as our policy. But we remained slow in granting it, because we suffered from an imperial hangover. The old feeling of obligation towards the peoples under our rule made us cautious. We must prepare them gradually for their liberty. It



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would be only kind to do so. To remove our guiding hand too abruptly would be to shirk our duty. We should set them up properly beforehand. While all they wanted from us was freedom, our plan was to give them freedom plus what we considered was the experience to use it to advantage.

In the case of Burma in 1942 this argument was very strong. We first had to undo what had happened through our failure to implement our bargain to protect the Burmese. The Japanese had to be driven out, though this meant Burma being fought over a second time with all the destruction to life and property involved. Then we had to rebuild everything which had been ruined and launch the new Burmese government under the most favourable conditions.

But the Burmese had had enough of our kindness. All they desired was for us to go.

What then was the Burmese view in May 1942 when we disappeared over the frontier and left the Japanese in possession? There is no reason to suppose that they were less intelligent than anyone else. When the Japanese declared war on America and Britain, everyone knew they were committing suicide. Churchill was not the only man who went tranquilly to sleep that night, sure that by bringing in America they had handed Britain the victory. No one with any acquaintance with Japan and the Orient doubted it. The Burmese did not. Even the poor ignorant hill tribes knew it, the Nagas and the Chins, and did not go over to the Japanese. The Burmese had no option; they were in the invaders' power and had to come to some sort of *modus vivendi*. But they expected the British to return. They knew them, their language, all about them. They would be returning sure enough. But having removed the invaders, they would have to remove themselves. They had failed in their bargain by letting in the enemy. They could never live that down. No matter how kind, how good, how generous they might be, they would have to go at once. They would have become ridiculous. They had been too humiliated ever to exercise authority again. One feels that Mr Yarnold, the deputy commissioner, had a prevision of this when, after fleeing from Mergui, he declared to Dorman-Smith: 'We

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will never be able to hold up our heads again in Burma.' And one sees here too the explanation of Dorman-Smith's own extreme reluctance to leave and his thought that it would be better for him to die on the pass. But it would have done no good for him to fall dead in the Hukawng. Nothing that he or any British ruler could do would be any use. The humiliation could not be washed away. The British could never be taken seriously again in Burma. No gifts, no clemency, no promises, no splendid plans for rehabilitation would serve. There was only one thing that would serve—a goodbye, a cordial, even an affectionate goodbye, but a quick goodbye, a goodbye for ever. It was different for the soldiers. When Stilwell exclaimed to the press: 'It is as humiliating as hell,' there was a remedy. His concern was only with the Japanese. He would go back and defeat them. In military usage that suffices—a defeat is wiped out by a victory. But a military victory could not absolve the British in their civil capacity. Had there been victory in the first instance, and the Japanese been defeated on the frontiers, the Burmese and British would have been brought close together. The Empire would have been proved a working proposition. The Burmese might have been content to remain in it at least as an equal partner. But the other would not do. A ruling power through whose neglect they had been subjected to two invasions, two devastations, had not a shred of credit left. But though, as I say, Yarnold knew this and Dorman-Smith at the last was evidently harassed by the thought, life goes on, hope springs, one cannot be certain, things may turn out better, it was worth trying, he would have a shot, he would devote himself to Burmese interests, he would come back with his hands full, he would be a true friend, prove the British were true friends, the Burmese should be pampered, they deserved all we could give them, we would make it up to them, all would be well, and we should all live happily ever afterwards.

The tragedy was that not the most loving friend, not the greatest saint, could relieve the wound. There was no anodyne but farewell.

What follows here relates how Dorman-Smith, trying to smother the half-articulate conviction which haunted him that

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the British connection with Burma was at an end, worked for three years and a half to perfect plans whose object was to restore her to prosperity; how he landed in Burma in September 1945 after the army had retrieved its reputation and driven the Japanese out; how he sought to give effect to his plans and asked for time to be allowed to do so; and how the Burmese, though they had little to say against the plans (and, indeed, themselves adopted some of them afterwards) refused him time and firmly, with set countenance, but without animosity, bade the British a final goodbye.

The failure, I think, broke his heart. But the failure was not his. He was involved in a world event. A new epoch was in gestation. It was not only that the British Empire, a trade empire rather than a cultural empire like Rome or a religious empire like Islam, was found wanting in the higher values. The Burmese refusal was part of a greater Asiatic movement. Asia had rejected Europe. The Japanese irruption itself was an aspect of that movement. But it was heretical. It did not truly represent the interests of Asia as a whole. Had the Japanese been intelligent enough, unselfish enough, had they been guided by the tenets of the Buddhism they had received from India, they might have established a pan-Asiatic confederation. But occulting their Buddhism, they resuscitated for political purposes a ridiculous paganism and primed up with nostrums from Fascist sources broke out with a malevolence as dangerous to Asia as was Hitler's to Europe. Asia rejected them also. Their defeat was expected with calm and received with satisfaction. No Oriental wept for them or thought that Asia had lost a champion. That old world had its own vision. Vasco da Gama's sowing had come to harvest and been gathered. For better or for worse the new harvest would be hers.

## CHAPTER XX

### *The Cabinet's Burma Policy*

A word about the situation in Burma after the withdrawal of the Government and the Imperial Army. The Japanese did not pursue into India. Had they been able to do so and bring the British to battle on the Manipur plain, they might have destroyed the forces which had eluded their grasp in Burma. But they were over-stretched. They could not mount at once what would have developed into a campaign to conquer India. The monsoon, moreover, had broken; the roads to the frontier were deep in mud and the mountain forests had become a more impassable barrier. They would also have had opposing them the Chin irregulars, not yet armed and drilled as they were later to become, but already prepared to dispute the passage through their hills. In holding off, the Japanese left part of hill Burma uninvaded. The Chin hills behind Kalembo remained under British administration as did the Kachin hill tracts to the northward.

On the sea, also, the Japanese hesitated to take advantage of their victories. Their warships commanded the Bay of Bengal. A determined naval thrust could have given them Ceylon and even Mauritius. In possession of the latter island, they would have been on the British communications, via the Cape, with Egypt and the Russians in the Caucasus. Had they established themselves there during the interval before the Americans had recovered from Pearl Harbour, when the Germans were driving into Russia and Rommel was threatening Egypt, they might have joined their Pacific strategy to the Germans' European strategy, and creating a world strategy have tipped the balance in the Germans' favour.

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But they paused. They had advanced quicker than they had expected. Plans were not ready for a further move. Their armies and fleets were already enormously extended. Lack of resources, and perhaps lack of vision and dash, lost them their opportunity. They decided to consolidate what they had got. This policy was fatal for them. It gave the British and the Russians time to halt the Germans and, above all, it gave the Americans time to build an overwhelming naval force on their flank.

Inside Burma their first concern was to set up a puppet civil administration. Thakin Aung San and the Thirty, who as we have seen had come in with the invaders and raised the Burma Independence Army to support them, had been promised as their reward that Burma would be made an independent state within the so-called Greater East Asia Co-Prosperity Sphere, and they expected this to take place at once. The Thakin party hoped to be entrusted with the government. But the Japanese immediately disbanded the Burma Independence Army, which by its indiscipline and excesses against the Burman inhabitants, particularly the Karens and the officials of the old regime, was creating grave disturbances. Aung San himself they thought too young, too inexperienced and too lacking in support to lead a government, though they retained him, with the rank of Major-General, as the commander of a new formation called the Burma Defence Army. Thakin Tun Oke, one of the Thirty, was given a trial as head of the administration. On finding him unsatisfactory, they selected U Ba Maw, mentioned in an early chapter as one of the Premiers who had preceded U Saw, and whom U Saw had sent to gaol for sedition. Ba Maw was not a member of the Thakin party. On 1 August he was made head (Ahnashin)<sup>1</sup> of a coalition executive, in which the Thakins were represented but did not hold a majority. The same day, General Iida, the Japanese conqueror of Burma, declared that though for the moment Ba Maw and his colleagues must be guided by him, it was the Emperor's intention to give the Burmese freedom provided they co-operated with Japan. Ba Maw at first believed this and by speeches and articles sought to persuade the Burmese public also to believe it.

<sup>1</sup>Ahna=power, shin=lord.

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But from what U Nu, now Premier of independent Burma, says in his book,<sup>1</sup> it is clear that even at this early stage few did believe it. As the Burmese became increasingly aware that the Japanese had entered Burma solely for their own imperial purposes, a resistance movement was developed by the Thakins. It was directed not only against the Japanese but against all foreign rule, and grew to be a nation-wide organisation. Later, when Aung San became its leader, it made him the most powerful man in Burma.

As we have seen, Dorman-Smith reached India on 4 May 1942. His immediate problem was to find somewhere to live, a suitable place where he, his Counsellors, Ministers and Secretaries, could function. There was a lot of current business to attend to. The British members of the senior services had been flown out, or were walking out, of Burma. These men had to be looked after, posted to some duty and paid. The refugees had to be housed and fed. Supplies of all sorts had to be sent up to the Hill Districts. The Viceroy was able to arrange for accommodation in Simla and thither the exiled Government moved. The question immediately arose whether it was necessary to maintain a Governor and Council when there was no longer a country to govern. It was evident that Dorman-Smith would have to go to London for consultation. He wrote to Amery on 16 May: 'I do not see that we can do any really useful work here, until I have had your advice,' and asked for leave to come. On receiving permission, he left for England on 11 June.

The Cabinet decided that the Burma Government should be maintained. That would show the world that the British regarded the loss of Burma as only temporary. As to how he should occupy the time of waiting, Dorman-Smith urged that he be allowed to plan for the day when the British would re-enter Burma. We should not return empty-handed. We must have plans ready to restore the country to its former prosperity. Burma had been promised dominion status. Before handing over to a national parliament, it was our duty to do all in our power, not only to mend what had been broken, but to compensate the Burmese for their great losses. The Cabinet agreed to allow him to plan,

<sup>1</sup>*Burma Under the Japanese*, chapter 2.

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though at the moment the Burmese were not in very good odour. U Saw and the Burma Independence Army had given them a bad name. U Ba Maw looked rather like Pétain. Nevertheless, the Cabinet did feel that the British failure to protect Burma from being overrun excused the Burmese for much.

Dorman-Smith returned from London to Simla at the end of August and began to organise his planners. The correspondence he carried on with Amery provides a commentary on the policy he was pursuing, and on the difficulties which he met. On 31 October he complains that the army was out of temper with him and the Burmese. 'Many of my officers feel that they are looked upon more as a nuisance than a potential help. I do not quite know why this should be, but I imagine that . . . there may be a hang-over from the Burma campaign. The majority of the senior officers at G.H.Q. are those who came over in the later stages of the invasion, when things were in a state of considerable untidiness. They seem to subscribe to the facile statement that "the civil administration broke down".' It had become the fashion in the messes to blame the military defeat on the civil government. Such nonsensical gossip was hardly worth referring to, except that it made difficult the cordial relationship which should exist between two services. What was more serious was the attitude of the soldiers towards the Burmese. They seemed to regard them as enemies, because of the few who had fought for the Japanese. Dorman-Smith urged that this was unjust and also stupid. There was little parallel between Ba Maw and the Vichy government. We should play our cards so that the Burmese would welcome us when we returned to drive out the Japanese. 'I hope,' he concludes, 'that the army will take a similar view when we come to talk things over.' This theme recurs several times in the correspondence.

The London discussions had set Amery thinking along the same lines, for writing on 17 November, before receiving the letter cited above, he says: 'I assume that you have been seeing to it that the Army are not going to march into Burma with the preconceived notion that all Burmans are traitors and that they are engaged on the conquest of an enemy country.' He himself

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is consulting the Cabinet so as to 'be in a position to offer the Burmese something attractive on our return to Burma'. He followed this up in December by saying that instead of shooting captured soldiers of the Burma army as traitors, when we re-entered the country, we should seek to enlist them against the Japanese. He added that he was writing to Wavell about this.

The Burmese of today will read these details with indulgence. They will admit that, though the enormity of the British default was not at this stage fully realised in England, they had in the Secretary of State and the Governor two men who were anxiously seeking to help them. The reconquest of Burma was to be a rescue. But a rescue was not immediately thought of as likely to be as painful for the Burmese as the Japanese conquest had been. Nor did the strategists point out that strategically a re-invasion might be superfluous. Yet Amery had an inkling of this as early as December 1942. In June the Americans had won the battles of the Coral Sea and of Midway. In November the grim fighting at Guadalcanal in New Guinea had gone in their favour. The Japanese flank was being driven in. They were in process of being cut off from their western conquests. The isolation of their homeland was approaching. If the Pacific campaign continued as it had begun they would be obliged to leave Burma without a shot being fired at them. As I say, Amery had a glimpse of this, for in his letter of 16 December to Dorman-Smith he says: 'Things may move quicker than we anticipate and the Japanese, committed to an obstinate defence of their position in the Solomons and New Guinea, may very possibly abandon the idea of invading India, or even of making a serious effort to retain Burma.'

Though this was a true insight into the strategical possibilities, pure strategy was not to govern events in the far-eastern war. A year and three months later the Japanese, despite a worsened strategic position, were to launch an invasion of India with inadequate resources. Its failure brought down on them a counter-attack which swept them out of Burma in a lightning campaign. But of this more later. It may be mentioned here, however, as a point of great interest that U Ba Maw, after the failure of the Japanese invasion of India and their crushing naval defeat in the



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Leyte Gulf in the Philippines in September 1944, visited Tokyo in November and strove to confront the Japanese government with the inexorable logic of their strategic situation, begging them to withdraw from Burma and thereby spare the Burmese the misery of a second invasion.<sup>1</sup> That they refused him was understandable; it was to take two atom bombs to make them see reason.

In Amery's above-quoted letter of 16 December 1942 he refers for the first time in the correspondence to a question which he had already discussed with Dorman-Smith and was to continue to debate for the next two and a half years. How long would it take after the war to put into operation the plans for restoring Burma to prosperity? The reconstruction would have to be done by the Governor before a parliament was called into being. If this period of direct rule were too long, the Burmese would complain that their constitutional freedom was being unduly delayed. He writes: 'The biggest difficulty is where to strike the right mean between the necessities of a perfectly free hand for reconstruction and our general pledges to Burma and the world for the restoration of self government.' Dorman-Smith had advised that a time limit for reconstruction of five or seven years should be fixed. Within that period he ought to be able to carry out all his plans. A free parliament could then be elected and Burma, a prosperous and going concern, handed over to it. If they succeeded in doing this, the British could feel that they had discharged their obligations to the Burmese people and could look back on their rule in that country with the satisfaction of a task well done. Amery agrees that some time limit should be fixed, so that the British Government could publish a White Paper in due course, telling the Burmese exactly what H.M.G.'s intentions were. It was assumed that the putting of Burma to rights by direct rule before it was handed over to a parliament

<sup>1</sup>See the Interrogation of U Ba Maw in Sugamo, 22 May 1946, in *International Military Tribunal, Far East*, Record of Proceedings, quoted on p. 356 of *Japan's New Order in East Asia* by C. F. Jones (1954), a book issued under the joint auspices of the Royal Institute of International Affairs and the Institute of Pacific Relations.

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would strike the Burmese as a generous policy and would attract their willing co-operation. That, in fact, it did not, provides the main tension for the rest of this book. The policy split precisely on the difficulty foreseen by Amery, the right mean between too long and too short a period of direct rule. The Burmese took the view that one year, rather than five or seven, would suffice, and since they succeeded in imposing their view they rendered abortive the plans so painstakingly evolved at Simla. The correspondence and other documents to be cited will show by what gradual steps all this came about.

On 23 February 1943 Dorman-Smith raised a point with Amery which proves how anxious he was that the period of direct rule after the war should secure the full co-operation of the Burmese. When he returned to Rangoon the British mercantile firms would be returning with him. Indeed, the reconstruction of the country's economy could hardly be achieved unless they started their business again, and proceeded as before to extract timber, oil, silver, lead, and export them. But inasmuch as they were British owned, financed and managed, and the Burmese only benefited from them indirectly, their re-establishment on their former basis would hardly be reconcilable with his new policy, which was to be wholly in the Burmese interest. The charge that they were entrenching themselves afresh under direct rule would be awkward to meet. To avoid it he proposed that 'the Government should to some degree participate in the running of the big firms'. He did not suggest control, but some power of direction which would insure that the Burmese had enough interest in the firms to wish them to remain. It would in the long run be sound policy for the firms, because if they flouted Burmese opinion, what consideration could they expect when, at the end of the period of direct control, the Burmese took over the government? Their rights could perhaps be guaranteed by treaty, but no guarantees they might abstract from H.M.G. now would serve them so well in the future as winning Burmese regard.

The firms eventually followed this advice, and that is why they are able at the present day to do business in republican Burma. But at this time their inclination was to seek a guarantee from

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the British Government that when Burma was given the status of a dominion, their existing rights would not be tampered with.

While Amery and Dorman-Smith were agreed on the policy to be adopted towards Burma, Amery had yet to obtain the Cabinet's concurrence. The Cabinet had so much else to think about that hitherto it had shown, as he says in one of his letters, small interest in Burmese affairs. He now sought to obtain its concurrence that direct rule be fixed at seven years and that the Treasury should help in the reconstruction, if Burmese revenues were insufficient. But the Cabinet was not persuaded by his arguments. It agreed in general that there should be a period of direct rule, but no time limit was fixed. As for finance, it refused to commit itself. Thus Amery and Dorman-Smith's policy, which the Burmese in 1945 were to reject as reactionary, appeared to the Cabinet in 1943, even when diplomatically represented by one of its own members, as too advanced. Dorman-Smith, however, was not left in the air, for Amery wrote: 'As a matter of fact, I don't think you need be worried. At any rate I am not. All it means is that Winston at this moment will not address his mind to the subject because he dislikes it. . . . I cannot see there is any other possible decision than the one which you and I favour. . . . When we are talking big about the relief and restoration of Europe we are not really going to be prepared to leave a ravished and impoverished Burma to sink or swim. . . . So go ahead with all your reconstruction work on the well-founded assumption that it will eventually have War Cabinet sanction. Meanwhile you must be content with mine.'

In regard to the British firms, Amery had shown in an earlier letter (dated 24 October 1942) that he well understood it would be a delicate matter to re-establish them after the war in the favoured position they had formerly occupied and to compensate them for their losses, as they expected. He wrote: 'There is a danger that Burmese suspicion of the European firms and of our policy in regard to them, . . . will be increased when the rehabilitation with Government assistance of British commercial enterprises begins. You and I are well aware how groundless such criticism would be. Any financial assistance to British firms . . . would be governed solely by the guiding principle of the interests

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of Burma.' And he adds: 'We naturally hope to have the assistance of the firms in the study of . . . reconstruction plans . . . and to get them to approach the subject from the point of view (of Burma's interest) and not merely from that of their own.'

The Cabinet's attitude towards the pace of constitutional advance in Burma, when it refused to fix a time limit to the period of direct rule, led Amery in a letter dated 26 May 1943 to point out that the question of guaranteeing the firms by treaty had ceased to be urgent. 'It was the idea that we were going to fix a time limit . . . which made the European firms nervous. Now that the idea of such a limit is shelved for the time being (unfortunately as you and I think from the point of view of Burmese contentment and tranquillity . . .) there is really less reason for the firms' anxiety. . . . We have a long period of uninterrupted direct rule in front of us in which there will be neither Ministers nor Legislature.' He is not against the idea of securing the position of the firms eventually by safeguards under a treaty, but that can be left over. 'There is a major difficulty . . . now in saying anything very definite to the firms, or to the Burmese, about the prospect of a Treaty, because the prior question of self government for Burma in a given period is itself now, as a result of the Cabinet's decision, still in the air.'

I have given some space to these citations on account of their importance. Dorman-Smith was conscious that the Cabinet's decision not to fix a time limit for his direct rule after the war endangered the success of his plans because it would disappoint the Burmese and set them against him when he most needed their co-operation. In such an atmosphere, moreover, it would be more difficult for him to overcome their bias against the British firms by inducing them to believe that British commerce and Burmese prosperity could be made complementary and that it was his policy to make them so. He thought that if he could persuade the Cabinet to fix a definite term at the end of which dominion status would be granted, the Burmese would be content to let him restore their country and would collaborate enthusiastically in the task, particularly if the term were five years rather than seven. He continued to press this view with Amery, who supported him.

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But the Cabinet, when it made its statement of policy for Burma in May 1945, still refrained from fixing any definite date for the promised dominion status, though it made what it considered liberal concessions in the matter of finance and the length of direct rule, concessions which it conceived would satisfy Burmese opinion. In effect, therefore, Dorman-Smith failed to get Cabinet support for what in his opinion was a vital point, if his general policy was to be successful. This put his task beyond the possible, though it is uncertain, even if the point had been conceded to him, whether what he set out to do was not an impossibility. The reader will judge when the narrative has brought him all the facts.

## CHAPTER XXI

### *The Birth of the Resistance*

U Nu records in his *Burma under the Japanese* that after he and his friend Thakin So had managed about 1 May 1942 to get out of Mandalay Jail, where as leading Thakins they had been under detention, they took refuge in a country monastery. 'After a day or two we moved on to Kanbaing village where we met Tet-pongyi Thein Pe and Kyaw Nyein. They had already started the resistance movement against the Japanese, and showed us a leaflet which they had printed on a hand-press.' As this meeting must have occurred about the same day that Dorman-Smith flew out of Burma from Myitkyina, Thein Pe should be regarded as the first of the Resistance men. He was a young intellectual who had been through Rangoon University, and joined the Thakin party. What he knew of Communist theory attracted him. Hence his immediate detestation of the Fascist Japanese. Eric Battersby records<sup>1</sup> that some time in the latter part of 1942 Thein Pe was sent by the Resistance to India with one Tin Shwe, another Thakin, to enlist British aid. He walked the whole way (it took him three months) going via Prome and the Taung-up pass and thence to Eastern Bengal. At first the British authorities suspected him of being a spy, but on

<sup>1</sup>The *Battersby Papers*. We last saw Eric Battersby, Dorman-Smith's A.D.C., struggling out of Burma by the Hukawng. During the last days of the march he fell ill and had to be carried. Under date of 19 June Lady Dorman-Smith notes that he arrived at Simla 'a ghost of his former self'. He was given a few months' leave in England at the beginning of 1943, and soon after his return was posted to Calcutta on the staff of Force 136, a Secret Service organisation, whose task was to get in touch with the Burma Resistance men and raise guerilla forces against the Japanese.

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his proving his *bona fides* he was given a job at Delhi in the Ministry of Information. After working there for a while, in the autumn of 1943 his services were placed at the disposal of Force 136, the Secret Service organisation referred to in the note below. The *Battersby Papers* show that it was Thein Pe who first enabled the Force to make contact with the leaders of the Resistance in Burma.

Dorman-Smith came across Tet-pongyi Thein Pe early in 1943. On 18 March he wrote to Amery: 'I think you will be interested to read the enclosed review of Thakin Thein Pe's book, copies of which I will send you as soon as I get them.' The book, or rather pamphlet, was called *What Happened in Burma*. Dorman-Smith had read it in typescript and assisted the author to get it published in India. He says to Amery: 'It is a queer book and I confess that at the beginning I had some doubts about allowing it to be published.' It described the brutal way the Japanese were behaving to the ordinary inhabitants of Burma. To cite a passage: 'The (Japanese) soldiery, officers and men, appear in their true colours, raping, looting and murdering, and that in a country which was recognised publicly . . . as an invaluable ally and co-operator.' Besides its exposure of the Japanese self-styled liberators, the book contained some severe strictures on British rule in Burma. It was these which had given Dorman-Smith pause. On reflecting however that a prominent Thakin, of the party which supported the Japanese invaders, had now turned against them, he saw the value of the book. Its very criticisms of the British made it the more authentic. 'It would have looked a bit too phoney,' he told Amery, 'if a leading Thakin came all over British.' The book concluded with the advice to Amery that if he wished for the Burmans' support in the war, he would do well to assure them that Burma was not only to be liberated from Japanese, but also from British, rule. 'Every intelligent Englishman who wants to win the war should read this pamphlet', wrote an American newspaperman, Mr Edgar Snow, in a foreword. Americans at that time, as we know, had a poor opinion of the British Raj, a fact which was always present in our statesmen's minds and which certainly influenced their policy.

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Thein Pe's pamphlet and his having come from Burma as an emissary of the Resistance posed a problem. On the face of it, there were strong military reasons for encouraging a Resistance, as strong as in France or anywhere else. But there was the complication that in Burma it represented the extreme left. We were invited to encourage men who, though they could be of service to us in the Japanese war, were no friends of the Raj. Put bluntly, they wanted us to drive out the Japanese and having done so to take ourselves off. If we recognised them, armed them, if they became our allies, their prestige would be so enhanced, that after the war was won they might be stronger than was convenient. The Resistance was the Thakin party, whose leaders had nearly all been in gaol for sedition, the sedition of advocating a revolution to throw the British out and win complete independence outside the Commonwealth. Such was the dilemma. But it was not clearly appreciated at this date in 1943. Sir Paw Tun and Sir Htoon Aung Gyaw, the two Ministers who had accompanied Dorman-Smith into exile, detested the Thakins and declared that they were also detested by the bulk of the Burmese people on account of the outrageous way some of the elements of their Burma Independence Army had behaved.<sup>1</sup> The argument was, therefore, that these Resistance people could be used as long as they were useful. Afterwards it would be possible to suppress them with the help of moderate Burmese opinion. The dilemma was hardly seen to exist. Force 136 with its staff, known as Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.) had, of course, no reservations as to the advantage of working with the Resistance, for any civil complications which might ensue were outside its orbit. Its sole duty was to harry the Japanese by fostering an underground. It will be evident that in the circumstances the *émigré* Burma Government could raise no objection to S.O.E. getting

<sup>1</sup>Among the Dorman-Smith papers is an *aperçu* by Sir Paw Tun written on 23 August 1943. In it he says of the Thakins: 'They have no credit at all among the real Burmese people, that is to say apart from their own section of youthful, irresponsible and ill-educated men, who constitute a very insignificant minority whom the Burmese people undoubtedly consider to be the worst traitors to their country's interests.'



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on with its job. Nor did they, as I have suggested, feel apprehensive at this time that to work with the Resistance Thakins would lead to difficulties. The cloud was still no larger than a man's hand. The threat was as yet hardly perceptible. And should it develop, it could be countered.

S.O.E. was not under the Army. It did not take its orders from Wavell, but looked to the War Cabinet. Its activities were shrouded in the utmost secrecy. No authority in India was given the details of its operations. On 15 February 1943 the administration of the bit of hill Burma not occupied by the Japanese had been placed under the *de facto* control of Wavell, though it remained *de jure* under Dorman-Smith. The administration was called The Civil Affairs Service (Burma) or C.A.S. (B) and was headed by Major General C. F. B. Pearce<sup>1</sup>, an Indian Civilian of the Burma cadre, who was appointed with that military rank. It was his duty, living on the frontier, to acquaint himself with what was happening in Burma and prepare for the day when he and his staff (mostly civil officers like himself with military rank) would follow the British army into Burma and take over the civil administration. But S.O.E., as a Secret Service, with its spies, cloak and dagger men, code names, hidden landing strips, gave him no information. He did not know until much later (certainly not in any detail) how the Thakin party had changed from being the small body of revolutionaries it was supposed to be into a fully organised national front. 'Which is what generally happens when a left wing goes underground,' as Mr Amery said to me one day when I was discussing this matter with him.

<sup>1</sup>Afterwards Sir Frederick Pearce, C.B.E.

## CHAPTER XXII

### *News from inside Burma*

By continuing to dip into the Amery-Dorman-Smith correspondence one may watch the situation as it developed from April to September 1943 when Dorman-Smith went again to London for consultation. A letter of his dated 8 April contains the first reference to Aung San. It would seem that up to this the Government knew nothing of this man, destined so soon to overshadow the whole Burma scene. The letter does not mention his name, either because it was unknown or would convey little to Amery. It says that a Burman official who had escaped from Arakan came to see Dorman-Smith and confirmed how disappointed in the Japanese the Thakin party was becoming. Some of his friends, he said, had gone down to Rangoon and met Ba Maw. He had two Japanese advisers who discouraged him from speaking to visitors alone and were present at any interview. Aung San was in like case. The letter has: 'The Thakin who has been made a Major-General is never allowed to be with his troops except on ceremonial parades. From being a very temperate young man he is now continuously drunk, this being his refuge from his disillusionment.' Such were the kind of tales carried out of Burma, as stupid as the tales which, as we shall see in a moment, were being told about Dorman-Smith in America. The letter contains also this bit of gossip: 'Ba Maw is said to go about with a phial of poison to be used either when the Japs turn against him or when we appear on the scene.'

A chat with somebody out of Burma, even if his stories were secondhand, was a change from the round of planning. The planners' enthusiasm was such that they sometimes got out of

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hand. 'They would very much like a much longer period of direct rule than they will probably get. Their reason is that they are mad keen to produce a Burma which will be 100% efficient based on *western standards*, that is to say run almost entirely by European officials. I pointed out the obvious difficulty of such a policy.' The letter goes on: 'Of course the trouble with experts is that they always consider that their own particular line is far the most important. The sort of argument is this: No real reconstruction work can be done unless our Agricultural policy is sound. Therefore the Agricultural Dept. must have all the funds it requires. "But," says the Education Dept. "you are not going to succeed unless your cultivator is properly educated. Therefore Education must take priority." "Let me point out," says the Policeman, "that unless we can ensure law and order you cannot do any reconstruction work at all." ' (As it turned out, the Policeman saw the clearest. Burma was in such a state of lawlessness when the civil Government took charge again, that it was next to impossible to start the programme.)

A letter to Amery of 22 April touches on matters which had importance then and afterwards. During the preceding months the British army had made an incursion into Arakan, and had been thrown back by the Japanese. 'Judging by our Arakan exploits, the re-conquest of Burma is not going to be a swift performance,' writes Dorman-Smith. The British reverse in Arakan is splendid propaganda for the Japanese who are telling the Burmese that their future is with victorious Japan. 'When I put myself in the place of the ordinary Burman, I am really very sorry for him.' Dorman-Smith is thinking partly of the Resistance. How can that movement thrive if our preliminary raids into Burma are so unsuccessful? But the Chin irregulars in the north, now better armed and led, are doing well, he reports. These staunch allies have a strong dislike of the Burmese and the Indians. He feels that it would be very wrong to include their territory and that of the Kachins, who to the northward were also fighting for us, in a future Dominion of Burma, unless they agreed to enter it. 'I am convinced that they should be separately administered for some years to come.' This afterwards became an acute prob-

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lem. The letter also refers to the fact that the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow's, time is up, that Wavell, the C.-in-C. has gone to London for consultation and that everybody is wondering what will happen—who Viceroy, will there be a change of C.-in-C., and who to command in the re-invasion of Burma, still perhaps far away, but possibly to be launched in the cold weather of 1943-44?<sup>2</sup>

In his letter of 6 May Dorman-Smith refers to the continuous attacks which had been made on him and his officers since the withdrawal to Simla. Besides the Army having built up Alexander at his expense (though of course Alexander himself had had nothing to do with this, having left India for his Mediterranean command) he had had a very bad press in America. India was swarming with American journalists, who had no knowledge of what had really happened. It seemed that the gossip which these men sent home was not censored and that the Americans were being given a travesty of recent history. A Mr Hillenbrand, from the American Consulate in Calcutta, came to see Dorman-Smith. 'He told me a few stories about my humble self which are current among his countrymen. The more I hear about myself, the more amazed I am at the sort of chap I am! Apparently I am directly responsible for poor Fielding Hall's suicide. After he made his tragic mistake of letting out the Rangoon convicts and lunatics I had him up on the mat and bullied him to such a degree that he went straight away and shot himself. (As a matter of fact I never saw the poor lad but had him put on another job in order that he should not brood over what was a perfectly honest mistake.) Then apparently not one single day passed without my having a stand-up row with Alex in Maymyo! In fact, says Hillenbrand, there is every chance that I will go down to history as "the Ogre Governor". He thought that it was a pity that the military despatches had not been published and hoped that we would soon put out something on the civil side, as he is, I think, quite genuinely distressed at the lies which have been told.'<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup>T. L. Hughes, whom we last met marching out with Alexander, was appointed Secretary to the Governor and was engaged at this time in drawing

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Considering that Dorman-Smith was so well known as a warm-hearted man, with an open engaging manner and distaste for unpleasantness (though he stood for his principles and was more Burmophil than was fashionable at the moment) accusations so utterly foreign to his nature were astonishing. Amery was a natural confidant in the circumstances, as the two had a strong regard for each other, which may be observed growing stronger as the correspondence proceeds.

The plans of the High Command were still cloaked in mystery, but it was clear that Stilwell would soon come into the picture again. He had been training a Chinese army at Ramgarh in India. There were 9,000 Chinese who had escaped to India after the collapse in Burma and some 45,000 more who had been flown over the Hump from China. The Americans had always attached more importance to Chinese help than we ever did. Stilwell's army was to be used, not for the reconquest of Burma, but to re-open land communications with China, so as to be able more effectively to bomb Japan from east China and supplement the naval pressure in the Pacific. Re-opening land communications meant reconquering a small part of the extreme north of Burma. The rumour was that Stilwell would advance down the Hukawng valley, building a road as he went, and seek to take Myitkyina, while Chiang Kai-Shek came from Yunnan to meet him. Let us switch on a moment and listen to the American's mocking voice, to assure ourselves that he is still alive. (Diary, early April 1943). 'The U.S. can go without their coffee, but the Limeys must have their tea. Rushed to Delhi, to squawk to Wavell . . .' (later in April) 'Wavell has a grievance. 18,000 of "his" trucks are in U.S. ports, and the goddam Americans won't ship them to him. Furthermore, if he doesn't get 180,000 tons a month, he just can't jump off. He only got 60,000 tons in March, and it's a bloody crime. He's gone to London to squawk. "Can't" is his best word. Everything is so goddam difficult that it's practically impossible. . . .' (May, Stilwell in Washington) 'Churchill has Roosevelt in his pocket. The Limeys are not interested in the up a full report on the civil side. It was, however, not published, but I have been able to consult it and have found it invaluable.

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war in the Pacific, and with the President hypnotised they are sitting pretty. Farewell lunch. Mr Churchill: "Mr President, I cannot but believe that an all-wise Providence has draped these great events, at this critical period of the world's history, about your personality and your high office." And Frank lapped it up.' . . . (Returns to East, June) 'Back again on the manure pile. . . . It's hell to be plumped back into this cesspool after having had a breath of fresh air. Chiang same as ever—a grasping, bigoted, ungrateful little rattlesnake. . . . I've got to pin a medal on Chiang and it will make me want to throw up.<sup>1</sup> . . . He had the wind up in a big way, to the point of throwing teapots and vases at visitors.' Yes, Stilwell is alive, all right!

Wingate had been on his first incursion behind the Japanese lines during these months. On 3 June Dorman-Smith writes that he was visited by a friend of his, one of Wingate's commanders, who told him how well the Burmese had received the British. 'They got to one place called Tigyaing where they found a small colony of ex-Government servants. My friend explained to them that the British had not yet returned for good but had just come in to kill a few Japs and pass the time of day with our old friends. This was a bit of a slump, but in spite of their feeling of disappointment, one old ex-postmaster got up before the whole crowd—which must have included the odd Jap agent—and shrieked out "God save the King".' There were reports that the local inhabitants suffered cruel reprisals afterwards. Dorman-Smith protests that to go in and then by withdrawing expose the Burmans to danger of torture and death was heartless. He ends this letter by asking Amery to give him some idea what was decided in Washington about future operations in Burma during Churchill and Stilwell's recent visit.

On 18 June Amery replied in a letter marked 'most secret and private'. Wavell was to be Viceroy, Auchinleck C.-in-C. India. No re-invasion of Burma in the cold season of 1943-44 was possible. But as the Americans wanted at once to re-open com-

<sup>1</sup>Stilwell wrote later to his wife: 'He was seated and not at all at his ease. When I grabbed his coat and pinned it on, he jumped as if he was afraid I was going to stab him.'

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munications with China an attempt would be made to reconquer the northern tip of Burma. Stilwell would advance on Myitkyina, Wingate in support make a second incursion behind the Japanese lines. Looking further ahead to when a full re-invasion would be possible, it had been decided to set up an independent command. The Commander, whoever he might be, would not be subordinate to the C.-in-C. India. Moreover, he would be in supreme command of land, sea and air forces, and the area of his command would include all South East Asia, Burma, Ceylon, Siam, Malaya, Sumatra and French Indo-China. His headquarters would be Delhi to begin with, but would be moved elsewhere, so that he might have complete freedom. Stilwell would be his deputy.

This is the arrangement to which Lord Mountbatten refers in para 1 of his despatch, where he says that in August he was appointed to the command. He took over his duties at Delhi in the first week of October 1943.

Stilwell's comment (in a letter to his wife) on the first part of this programme is dated 19 June. 'You will be laughing about today's news that Wavell is to be pushed upstairs and the Auk replace him.' His opinion of Mountbatten will be cited later; 'Glamour Boy' was to be his name for him. Stilwell belongs to High Comedy. Like a true character of High Comedy he had a sad end. But of that in its place.

When Dorman-Smith heard that the main re-invasion of Burma would not take place in the winter of 1943-44, as he had hoped it might, he began to wonder whether it was justifiable to keep on the Burma Government. He was aware of public criticism. 'It is of course quite a common belief,' he writes, 'that the Reconstruction lads are enjoying a complete holiday and doing absolutely nothing at all.' And he relates a conversation he had with Linlithgow just before he vacated the Viceroyalty. 'He asked me what I thought my fate would be if and when we finish our reconstruction work but still have to face a longish period before we can get back to Burma. He suggested that it would be a bad thing just to continue up here doing nothing. I was left with the impression that in the kindest way he was dropping a hint that my position even now is open to misunderstanding.'

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But to abolish the Government altogether was surely unnecessary. 'There is a lot to be done if we are to do full justice to the Burmese people. . . . It would break my heart not to go back to Burma at all.' Perhaps he could stay on half pay for a while in London and leave Sir John Wise, his Counsellor, in charge of the office in Simla? He asks Amery for his opinion. An added worry was that his senior Minister, Sir Paw Tun, seemed to be suffering from persecution mania. 'He rants in a very loud voice and try as we did, none of us could fathom what he was trying to get at.'

Amery, though convinced that Dorman-Smith had enough essential work to keep him busy for some time, thought a change would do him good and summoned him home for consultation.

Before he left at the end of August, there had been an important development inside Burma. On the first of that month the Japanese had declared the country an independent state. Ba Maw, till now Head Executive (Ahnashin), was given the title of Naing-gan-daw Adipati, Chief of State. Though not a Thakin himself, he had allied himself with the Thakins, as they were growing too powerful for him to ignore. With Japanese sanction he appointed as Ministers four leading Thakins, General Aung San to be Minister of Defence, Thakin Than Tun (Communications), Thakin Nu (Foreign Affairs) and Thakin Mya to be Deputy Premier. There was no legislature. Outwardly the new government had the appearance of a Burmese dictatorship, but like the Executive which preceded it, was no more than a facade behind which the Japanese army continued to rule the country. Indeed, it was explicitly laid down in a secret agreement between Ba Maw and the Japanese that the C.-in-C. could nullify any action of the Burmese Government in the name of military expediency. The Japanese hoped, however, that the grant of independence, hollow though it was, would be accepted as the fulfilment of the promise of freedom made at the time of the invasion and that it would suffice to content the general population, whose secret resistance they suspected and feared. It would also, they hoped, be good propaganda for them in India, where they expected a revolution in their favour.

It was not, however, the Japanese who were deceiving the Burmese, but the other way round. When Ba Maw put up the



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names of the four Thakins for portfolios, the Japanese were delighted because they knew them to have a very large backing in the country. It seemed a triumph to have induced four influential men to support such a qualified independence. But these four men, unknown to them, were the chief Resistance leaders. Thakin Than Tun was actually the head of the Resistance. In his book already cited Thakin Nu says: 'Than Tun only accepted office because he thought that this would be the best cover for him to play his part in the resistance movement.'<sup>1</sup> This stands also for Thakin Nu himself, who from first to last was Than Tun's confidant and advisor, though his religious scruples prevented him from taking an active part in the movement. Thakin Mya was only second to Than Tun as the intellect behind the Resistance. General Aung San, later its chief hero, because he led the Burma Defence Army in open insurrection against the Japanese, was in August 1943, when he took office, already secretly preparing for that very stroke, a fact which three months later was known to Special Operations Executive (S.O.E.) In the *Battersby Papers* is the following statement: 'In November 1943 contact was established by wireless with Major H. P. Seagrim.'<sup>2</sup> One of his early reports was remarkable in that it stated that a certain Aung San of the Burma Defence Army was planning to turn his forces against the Japanese when opportunity presented itself.' Mr Battersby adds that many Englishmen have mistakenly believed that Aung San only decided to do this after the British army had entered Burma in 1945 and already virtually defeated the Japanese. 'But I can guarantee the authenticity of Major Seagrim's report which I saw myself.' There is ample evidence, besides, in Thakin Nu's book that Aung San by 1943, if not before, had repented of thinking the Japanese were liberators and had become a member of the Resistance.

The Japanese commanders in Burma seem to have been badly served by their secret police. To construct a puppet government, only to fill its key posts with the Resistance, was surely a piece

<sup>1</sup>*Burma Under the Japanese*, p. 62.

<sup>2</sup>Major Seagrim had remained in Burma after the withdrawal of the British and organised a force of Karen irregulars in the hills.

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of bungling hard to cap. The way they tricked the hated Japanese kept the Burmese laughing when they had much to cry about, as constantly appears in Thakin Nu's book. The best joke of all was the new Government's declaration of war on England and the United States. That the Japanese did not see that this was a cover up seemed the height of comedy.

But what of Ba Maw, the Adipati, installed with almost royal honours? Was he also in the Resistance, was he too laughing at the Japanese? For answer one must study Thakin Nu's book. Ba Maw was a romantic whose dream had long been to rule Burma. His political career before the war had ended disastrously in gaol and he thought it a wonderful piece of luck when the Japanese invaders picked on him to head the Executive. He was very soon disabused of his belief that they were entrusting him with real power, but he preferred what authority he had to nothing at all and accepted the position of Adipati though he knew it was more the shadow than the substance of his dream. For that shadow of power he was ready to serve the Japanese. But he conceived of himself also as the protector of the Burmese. He did not crawl to his employers. He was not a mere yes-man. He stood up to the Japanese when he could and, as he became more indispensable to them, was able to speak for the Burmese with greater effect. He even took considerable risks by telling his masters unpalatable truths. The greatest risk he ran was in keeping his mouth shut about the Resistance. That he appointed as Ministers four Resistance Thakins was very daring. He averted his eyes from what they were doing, and Thakin Nu, sure he would never betray them, even made him his confidant on some occasions. In sum, Ba Maw was also tricking the Japanese. As long as they remained, he would be Adipati. When they went, he would be well placed with the Thakins, whom he backed as likely to be the strongest party at the peace.

Such was the situation developing inside Burma when Dorman-Smith left Simla at the end of August 1943 to consult H.M.G. in London. The Thakins, not the Anglophil parties, had organised the main Burmese Resistance. S.O.E. was already in touch with them and planned to aid them with money and arms. In their view,

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they were asking for this Secret Service help as allies. Just as the French Resistance could assume that the British and Americans, when they invaded the continent and drove the Germans out of France, would not stay and govern France, so the Burmese Resistance claimed to assume that the British would have no right after defeating the Japanese to stay and govern Burma. The future Government of Burma was already in existence. The four Thakin ministers were the shadow cabinet of a sovereign state.

His Majesty's Government and their agents, the *émigré* Burma Government, put a different interpretation on what had happened. The revolutionary party, known as the Thakins, after failing to organise a rebellion and being gaoled for their pains, had welcomed the Japanese and raised troops to support them. Having seen their error, they were now resisting and asking the British for help. Though no other Burmese party had bestirred itself in this way, the Chins, Kachins and Karens had raised levies and were valiantly fighting the Japanese. The Thakins, as their history showed, represented only a small section of the Burmese nation. Though we could not afford to refuse them recognition, their resistance was unlikely to help us materially. Our obligation to them would be slight, and would be cancelled out by their former behaviour. They had much to live down. Yet, if they worked with us loyally now against the enemy, this would be taken into account.

The fundamental difference between the two views was that whereas the Thakins thought of themselves as the true national front, H.M.G. saw them as no more than one of several parties. Nevertheless, S.O.E. was obliged to operate through them as they were the only organised Resistance. This amounted in practice, however, to a recognition that they represented the will of the Burmese people to drive out the Japanese. One is bound to ask the question why it was the Thakins and not some other party that raised the Resistance. The answer can only be that they were the sole party capable of doing so. But how did they acquire the capacity in so short a time? In 1942 they were on the run and appeared to have little support. One must conclude that in fact they were more formidable than appeared. What they really were

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was a Resistance against the British. Their village organisation was already functioning in 1942. The support they gave the Japanese at first was part of their policy as a Resistance. There was the chance that the Japanese promises were true. The moment it was clear they were not true, the machinery hitherto used against the British was used against the Japanese. They had not to alter a line of their ideology. Sovereignty of the Burmese people was their constant goal. It followed that though they were now recognised by S.O.E. and about to receive its help, they were still the Resistance against the British.

On the eve of Dorman-Smith's departure for London he was handed by Paw Tun the *aperçu* already mentioned. The main argument it contained was that as the Thakins, being blackguards and traitors, had not the support of moderate opinion, the opinion of the great bulk of the population, the right policy was to rouse the masses against them and in favour of H.M.G.'s policy. If informed through a well organised propaganda department that the British intention was only to stay a definite time in Burma, say five years, and during that time to rebuild her economy, thereafter constituting her a Dominion, the Burmese would be content and would come over in active support. But the propaganda, said Paw Tun, would have to be brilliantly conducted, for among the Thakins were some clever people. Let His Excellency bear these considerations in mind during his deliberations with His Majesty's Government.

The reader will immediately perceive the fatal flaws in Paw Tun's memorandum. Churchill had refused to fix a definite date for the grant of Dominion Status, so that what the Burmese public was sure to consider the chief attraction of the programme would have to be left out. And how was such a propaganda to be conducted over the head of the Thakin Resistance, with which S.O.E. was already dealing?

## CHAPTER XXIII

### *Dorman-Smith and Churchill*

As Dorman-Smith flew home via North Africa, he thought of U Saw in Uganda, still detained as a political prisoner. So much had happened since his friend's indiscretion with the Japanese Ambassador in 1941 that what he had done seemed now a small thing compared with U Ba Maw's collaboration with the Japanese and the misdeeds of the Burmese Independence Army. On his previous trip home he had passed through Uganda and was able to secure for the *détenu* some extra comforts. It now struck him as odd that he was on his way to London to make much the same request to Churchill as U Saw had made. More and more apprehensive that his programme would lack Burmese support unless H.M.G. stated the duration of direct rule<sup>1</sup> and the date for Dominion Status, he had resolved to raise the point with Churchill himself if he found the opportunity. But he was not more sanguine than U Saw had been, as Churchill had consistently refused to commit himself to dates. There was a particular reason, too, for his not being over hopeful. It happened that on

<sup>1</sup>It should be noted that the legality of direct rule was provided for by section 139 of the Government of Burma Act, 1935, whereby the Governor was enabled in an emergency to exercise all the powers granted under the Act to the Council and Legislature. The section had been invoked to legalise Dorman-Smith's official acts after he reached Simla, as his Council and Legislature no longer existed, and would be the authority on which rested his direct rule on return to Burma. The Burmese much disliked the section. There is extant a Burmese caricature of Dorman-Smith which shows him arriving back in Rangoon with a golliwog as a present for Ma Burma's children. The children are delighted till they notice that 139 is marked on the golliwog. Disappointed, they refuse the present.

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21 July he had made a public statement wherein the words 'hand over to the Burmese' were used. The statement, in fact, did not go further than to reiterate the Cabinet's promise to help Burma to obtain responsible government within an unstated period, but as reported by Reuter and printed in the *Daily Express* it seemed to suggest an early cession. Amery had written: 'Winston's eagle eye fell on the Reuter report and he took exception to the use of the words "hand over"—I quite understand from your telegrams that you made no new utterance at all. . . . I have explained the situation to him. . . . He strongly feels that in present circumstances it is most inopportune to make any new statements about self-government. . . . I think therefore that we should for the present at any rate be extremely cautious. . . .'

After his arrival in England he received in due course an invitation to lunch at Chequers. The great patriot, now at the height of his power, had on his intimidating expression. 'You're the man, I hear,' he rallied him, 'who wants to give away the Empire.' Dorman-Smith hastened to deny any such intention, but submitted that Mountbatten, whose appointment as Supreme Commander had by now been announced, would be obliged before attacking the Japanese in Burma to declare H.M.G.'s policy towards the Burmese, for his operational plans would be conditioned by it. If the policy were unacceptable to the Burmese, they might seek to oppose the British re-entry and Mountbatten would in that case have to allocate troops to fight them. By proclaiming, however, that we came to rescue them and, after rehabilitating their country, would within a stated period put it under their rule, we should secure their active co-operation and bind them to us by such terms of affection that they would never want to leave the Empire.

But it was all no good. Churchill would neither agree to make a statement nor say what statement he might eventually make. Dorman-Smith left the house, having been no more successful than his former Premier.

In the course of meeting members of the War Cabinet he found Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour, sympathetic. When told about the plans being made in Simla, he said: 'Yes, we ought to try and

make Burma into an Empire gem.' 'My officers and I passionately desire to do this very thing,' Dorman-Smith replied and sent him a memorandum of the programme. In this paper he pointed out that his aim was not only to restore the material ravages of war, but to change the whole spirit of the British administration, reforming the abuses which had admittedly crept in and introducing measures 'suited to the national genius of the Burmans'. He hoped Bevin would use his influence with the Government and help to make available the finance and supplies, essential if the programme were to be realised. He also hoped that he would talk to Churchill.

In other directions Dorman-Smith was indefatigable in putting Burma's case for special consideration and educating the British public in Burmese affairs. He made, for instance, a long speech to the East India Association. 'We will be going back to liberate our own people from Japanese bondage,' he told an audience rather astonished to hear the Burmese so described. But would they welcome us? Yes, if we went in with the right policy. We must win Burmese trust by an unequivocal statement of our intentions. 'I know that I am speaking out of my turn, but with all the force at my command I would urge His Majesty's Government to be definite as regards their intentions.' He sketched his plans to 'build a contented Burma, which will have no wish whatsoever to contract out of the Empire.' (He was probably the earliest public man to hint at such an eventuality, for it was generally unthought of in 1943.)

It occurred to him also that documentary films might make the Burmese more real in the public mind. If people saw how charming and human they were, sympathy would be aroused and their problems better understood. He was fortunate in being able to secure the services of Colonel Hodgkinson, who had films of Burmese life. These were shown both to the troops in India and to large audiences in England, which included the Royal Family and the Commons, and made a most favourable impression. In short, Dorman-Smith did all he could to speak up for Burma. But he was obliged to return to Simla without having won the vital point of a statement on Burma's future which, if in the form of a

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promise that direct rule would last a stated number of years, to be succeeded by Dominion Status, would, he believed, have given his plans a great chance of success. So keenly did he feel the failure that he suggested resigning, but Amery bade him be patient and perhaps Churchill would come round.



## CHAPTER XXIV

### *Mountbatten becomes Supreme Commander*

On Dorman-Smith's return in November 1943, he found Mountbatten installed at Delhi as Supreme Allied Commander, an appointment which profoundly altered the set of things in all that region.

Mountbatten (his style at this time was Admiral, Hon. Lt.-General and Hon. Air Marshal, the Lord Louis Mountbatten, G.C.V.O., K.C.B., D.S.O., A.D.C.,) was a man of forty-three, an out-of-door man, very clever, though he would have disliked to be called an intellectual. Born a prince of the House of Hesse and a great-grandson of Queen Victoria, he had entered the Navy at the age of thirteen, was a Midshipman at sixteen, at twenty a Lieutenant, at thirty-two a Commander, at thirty-seven a Captain, and by forty-three was acting as Admiral and was a member of the Chiefs of Staff Committee. His royal blood and the rapidity of his rise would have sufficed to make him a man of note. But it was the individuality of his character which chiefly distinguished him. No one quite like him had been seen in those parts before. No previous servant of the Crown, moreover, had been entrusted with so much power. With great dash, good spirits, a relish for adventure, and a natural *panache*, he was also hard-working and highly efficient, a steady, ingenious, determined man. These plain qualities balanced his character, added force to charm, and supported flair. They also gave him confidence that he could apply his talents and accomplish the task which Churchill had laid on him, the defeat of Japan on the mainland of Asia. The difficulty of directing the complex organisation committed to his charge was immense. To give an idea

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of what was entailed it will be enough to mention that his headquarters staff had some thirty different departments, each headed by a General; that on the operational side he had under him two naval Commanders-in-Chief, three army Commanders-in-Chief and one air Commander-in-Chief; and that agreement on a multitude of questions had to be reached with Roosevelt, Chiang Kai-Shek and the Viceroy of India. His directives came from Churchill via the Chiefs of Staff, with whom he was obliged to keep in the closest touch. He had to be mindful of world strategy and world politics. And the political situations inside the countries now occupied by the Japanese were his concern where they affected military operations. The re-taking of Burma was to be his first objective. It followed that, broadly speaking, Burma was handed over for him to deal with. Until he had finished his task, he was bound to overshadow the Government of Burma at Simla. The Cabinet, however, had decided against dissolving that Government, or, in the alternative, bringing it to London and setting it up as an advisory body attached to the Burma Office. Dorman-Smith was to remain where he was, continue his planning and let Mountbatten have as many more civil officers as possible for the Civil Affairs Service, Burma, the military Administration manned by civil officers with military rank. This Service, which had been, along with the northern slice of hill Burma it administered, *de jure* under Dorman-Smith and *de facto* under Wavell since 15 February 1943, was, with its territory, handed over to Mountbatten *de jure* and *de facto* on 1 January 1944. At the same time he received a directive from the Chiefs of Staff which he paraphrases as follows in para. 1 of the Civil Affairs section of his Despatch: 'While Burma continued to be a scene of actual operations, and thereafter in so far as Burma remained a base for further operations, military requirements would be paramount. Until it became possible having regard to these requirements . . . for Civil Administration to be re-established, Civil Affairs would be under a Military Administration deriving its authority from me.'

In plain language this amounted to there being two Governments of Burma. Dorman-Smith was still left with his statutory

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powers under S.139 of the Burma Act of 1935. But he had been deprived for the time being of all executive powers within the area from which his Government took its name. For practical purposes Mountbatten had succeeded him. Since, however, he was still Governor of Burma, though without authority to pass any orders inside it, and was to continue with his programme of reconstruction, to be put into force as soon as he regained outlet for his statutory powers, his role was not without its complexities. Mountbatten, guided by military requirements, might pursue a policy inconsistent with his. It was a confusing situation, the outcome of which could not be accurately forecast. He could, of course, put his views to Mountbatten and in case of disagreement refer to Amery. But since the directive above quoted laid down that military requirements would be paramount, it was unlikely that Amery could do much for him if Mountbatten quoted its terms as his reason for any particular action.

The two were already acquainted, for Dorman-Smith during his recent visit to England had met the newly appointed Supreme Commander. Their conversation had turned chiefly on a statement of policy by Churchill. Mountbatten agreed that from the military point of view it would certainly be advisable, before he re-entered Burma, for such a statement to be made. Indeed, Dorman-Smith found him sympathetic towards his plans in general, particularly to a generous approach to the Burmese. That differences of opinion might subsequently divide them was not apparent at this stage.

We must now touch in sequence on the main events of 1944 and watch the situation develop. The full scale invasion of Burma had had to be postponed, as the resources to mount it were still inadequate, but Stilwell advanced into the Hukawng Valley with the limited objective of gaining Myitkyina and re-opening land contact with Chiang Kai-Shek. He was fully committed when, half way through January, Intelligence reported that the Japanese were concentrating on the Chindwin as if for an invasion of India via Tamu. For the Japanese at this stage to seek to extend their already over-extended lines, and at a moment when the Pacific naval war was going against them, was, as pointed out

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further back, a proceeding the sense of which is hard to determine. An invasion in the dry weather of 1942-43 might have been justified by global strategy. Now it was a gamble which even if it succeeded would lead to nothing. For a particular reason also it was advantageous to the British. 'The Japanese played into our hands,' wrote Mountbatten in his Despatch. In support of Stilwell's advance into the Hukawng there had been planned a demonstration in force as far as the Chindwin, so as to draw off as many Japanese troops as possible. The Japanese by concentrating nearly all their forces on the Chindwin and crossing the mountains into India, themselves drew off their troops from Stilwell's front. They played into our hands also because they had to fight us on our home ground, close to our supply dumps and airfields, while they were strung out far from their bases, with their line of communication the Chindwin-Tamu road, still very inadequate for supplying an army. The offensive started on 15 March, after the Japanese had made a feint in Arakan. During this month Wingate<sup>1</sup> made his second incursion, his brigades being flown in on the 5th and the 22nd to the region south of Myitkyina and the line of the Japanese communications thereto. Stilwell, assisted by these circumstances, was able to continue down the Hukawng and took Myitkyina airfield on 7 May. Chiang Kai-Shek, true to form, failed to advance to meet him and the road to China was not re-opened via Bhamo. Nevertheless Stilwell maintained himself at Myitkyina airfield and subsequently took the town itself.

Meanwhile the Japanese had been having some success in India against the Fourteenth Army whose C.-in-C. was Lt.-General Sir William Slim who in 1942 had been G.O.C. of 1 Burcorps. The British position in the frontier region had the weakness that its lines of communication ran parallel to its front. This enabled the Japanese by using their envelopment tactics, which had proved decisive during their invasion of Burma, to cut the British communications and surround large forces at Imphal on the central plain of Manipur and at Kohima on the Assam frontier. The situation was threatening for a while, but they failed to

<sup>1</sup>It was during this operation that he was killed.

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overcome the troops they had cut off, because, having lost command of the air, they were unable to prevent supplies and reinforcements reaching the beleaguered divisions by transport planes. The divisions, in fact, were not cut off, as they appeared to be, since it was possible to substitute air for land communications. By June the danger was over. The Japanese invasion of India had failed. They had lost thirty thousand men. Their troops, who had depended on capturing British stores, were starving. Their communications were being heavily bombed. They withdrew in disorder, followed up to their surprise by the British army, for they thought that pursuit would be impossible in the monsoon.

Thus within eight months of assuming supreme command, Mountbatten destroyed the Japanese legend of invincibility and by inflicting a crushing defeat upon them on the plain of Manipur prepared the way for a counter offensive, far more likely to be successful than if the enemy had stood on the Chindwin frontier and opposed him in full force as he came in.

The Burma Government in its eyrie at Simla had perforce to be the passive spectator of these important events. The correspondence from which I have been quoting continues to show them hard at work on their plans and occasionally gives us glimpses which serve to suggest how things in general were shaping. The Burma Office was critical of some of the plans submitted to it, calling them too elaborate and expensive. Dorman-Smith protested that we couldn't win over the Burmese on the cheap. Amery replied that anyway it was useless to ask the Treasury for what would certainly be refused. Moreover, England would be broke after the war. Dorman-Smith tried to move him by describing the miseries of the Burmese. Quoting an Intelligence report, he says on 2 April: 'The people are in rags. There is no salt, matches, cooking oil. They have barely enough to live on, as the Japs have taken away all their rice, poultry, pigs and cattle. They are suffering from small-pox, skin diseases and malaria, as there are no hospitals and medicines. Shortage of bullocks has made rice cultivation impossible.' In the same letter he reports that he and Mountbatten have been exchanging ideas on how to

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meet Burmese political aspirations: 'I think our minds are working along parallel lines.'

On 1 August an event of importance occurred inside Burma, though news of it was not received until later and its full significance became only gradually apparent.

It was exactly a year before, 1 August 1943, that the Thakin party, the Resistance in disguise, gained control under Ba Maw of the puppet government of Burma. The powerlessness of the puppet government has perhaps been exaggerated. The Japanese had less hand in the internal administration of the country than had had the British. There were no Japanese district officials, for instance, like the powerful British deputy commissioners. The Burmese were, if not governing, at least administering themselves, though the Japanese with their secret police, the Kempetai, claimed the right to act outside the law in the name of military security, and no man was safe from arrest and torture. A few renegade Burmans acted as spies for the Kempetai. These men were the real collaborators, comparable to the Vichy French. In this connection U Nu<sup>1</sup> played a clever trick. He wormed his way into the confidence of Major General Matsuoka, the head of the Kempetai, till, as he says, they were 'quite good friends', and managed to persuade him to take on three Thakins as assistants. The men contrived to muddle the Kempetai and make them believe that there was little or no disaffection. But during the twelve months between 1 August 1943 and 1 August 1944 the whole nation had become disaffected. Besides the active Resistance, which made raids and sabotaged, the general population was passively resistant. All party differences were waived for the moment. The curse of Burmese politics had been the number of parties—the Patriotic, the Socialist, the Communist, the Fabian, the Church Council, the Youth League and the Mahabama or Great Burma party (and there were others). Now only one party existed, a Resistance not a political party, its sole aim sovereignty for the Burmese; a double aim as sovereignty had to be won not only from the Japanese but also from the British. The country had never been so united before.

<sup>1</sup>See p. 51 of his *Burma under the Japanese*.

## *Mountbatten becomes Supreme Commander*

On 1 August 1944, under pretence of celebrating the first anniversary of Burma's independence, the Resistance leaders held a conference. Inasmuch as the Thakin party with the rest had merged in the national front of the Resistance, a name had to be found to cover the united parties. The name chosen was the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, generally seen shortened to its initials A.F.P.F.L.<sup>1</sup> The occasion was marked by what Burmans of today piously remember as a moving harangue by General Aung San, in which he denounced the Japanese and declared that he and his army would lead the nation in rebellion against them as soon as his plans were ready and opportunity offered. A manifesto was issued, afterwards to become a national document, a sort of Bill of Rights, beginning significantly with the words: 'We the people of Burma.' It announced the intensification of the Resistance (revolt of the army, guerilla warfare, refusal to work, a general rising). An even more perfect unity must be achieved. The outline of an ideal republican constitution was sketched.<sup>2</sup> Thakin Nu records that the 'conference was held at my house. Among those present were members of the Inner Circle, Thakin Mya, General Aung San, Thakin Than Tun, and Thakin Chit. When the General read out his long proclamation entitled "Rise and attack the Fascist Dacoits!" we all approved and supported it. The army would take the responsibility for printing it, and distribute it to the revolutionaries all over Burma. . . . It was from that day that the Burma Defence Army was systematically linked up with the revolutionaries outside the army'.<sup>3</sup> Thakin Nu also records that Aung San and Than Tun, aware that complete unity was essential, had already won over the Karens, who 'in general took all Thakins for criminals and enemies' because during the invasions some Thakins of the original Burma Independence Army had got out of hand and committed murders in the Karen

<sup>1</sup>The name sometimes appears as Anti-Fascist Organisation (A.F.O.) and as Burma Patriotic Front.

<sup>2</sup>It is to be noted that from the first AFPF League aimed at establishing a republic. It was opposed to Burma staying inside the Commonwealth as a Dominion.

<sup>3</sup>Page 105 of *Burma under the Japanese*.

## *Mountbatten becomes Supreme Commander*

districts. He attributes Aung San's success in bringing the Karens into the A.F.P.F. League<sup>1</sup> to his 'magnetic personality' and says that 'when strangers met him they were immediately attracted'. So far in this narrative Aung San has been a shadowy figure. He will soon emerge from behind the scenes and become a leading protagonist. In this year of 1944 he was only twenty-eight years of age, a small man with a bluff manner, intense, silent, authoritative, quick. He was good-looking and still had almost a boyish air, his eyes bright and expectant, though with a hint of moody sadness. He was so quiet, so unassertive, that the Japanese never suspected him. The Burma Defence Army numbered some 10,000 men. Its officers were Burmese, but the sergeant instructors were Japanese. Though well armed, it was not so heavily and completely armed as the Japanese forces. Besides this precaution, a close watch was also kept on it. Nevertheless, the men had their secret instructions and awaited their leader's word to rise. It was not going to be an easy matter to arrange. The Japanese had about 150,000 troops in the country. Aung San's manifesto contained the statement that increased efforts would be made to 'co-operate with the Democratic Allies'.<sup>2</sup> The rising, if possible, would be timed to fit in with the British plans, so as to give it the best chance of success. But as appears from Mountbatten's Despatch, the Defence Army would have revolted even if co-operation with the British had not been secured.<sup>3</sup>

It is stated in the *Battersby Papers* that the news of the August conference reached Intelligence, S.O.E. Branch, in September. Some soldiers of the Burma Defence Army were captured on the frontier. During their interrogation it came out that they had been told secretly by their officers to be ready to revolt against the Japanese. 'I interviewed one of them,' Mr Battersby noted.

<sup>1</sup>The Karens joined the League as the Resistance against the Japanese, but they never completely identified themselves with it and subsequently broke away.

<sup>2</sup>See the text of the manifesto published on p. 177 of *Burma in the Crucible* by Maung Maung Pye.

<sup>3</sup>See para 494. The word ally is here important to note. Britain was not recognised by the League as overlord of Burma, but as an ally.



### *Mountbatten becomes Supreme Commander*

'He volunteered to drop by parachute into Burma near Rangoon to give what message we chose to the Resistance leaders there.'

The captured soldiers were mere privates and, though they had heard of the August conference, could not convey in words its full significance. They did not mention that all parties had joined in a league 'to destroy Fascism and set up a People's Government', as the manifesto phrased the double purpose of the Resistance. And it would have been beyond them to explain, had they heard it, that the resolution to set up a People's Government meant that the heads of the League considered themselves, though still underground, to be the Provisional Government of Burma. S.O.E.'s understanding of the situation was therefore still very limited. Furthermore, the report they sent in, such as it amounted to, was secret information, available only to their own department. The statutory Government of Burma in Simla had no access to it. But even if it had had access and if the report had included a fuller appreciation of Burmese political developments than it could have included, the Government must have doubted its validity, since it would have seemed so contrary to what they had been led to believe. That the A.F.P.F. League was that unheard of phenomenon in Burma, a united front, would have sounded incredible.

The question immediately arises: if the Resistance had set up an underground Provisional Government, how would it take the news that the old Government would be returning (and returning too, in its emergency form under Section 139 as a British executive uncontrolled even by the semi-parliament of pre-war times) to rule for an unstated number of years, in order to restore the country's economy? The remaining chapters will be largely an answer to this question:

## CHAPTER XXV

### *The end of Stilwell*

For the sake of clarity, the standpoints of the chief characters in this story are here stated again in brief. Churchill put the reconquest of Burma first and refused to be drawn into making a declaration on its future status. Amery and Dorman-Smith, though bound by his policy, urged that the Burmese be told the length of direct rule and the date when Dominion Status would be given, believing that this would go some way to satisfying them. The Resistance men, now called the Anti-Fascist People's Freedom League, claimed that their leaders were a Provisional Government which should be recognised as such as soon as the Japanese had been driven out and which would be followed by a republican Government. Mountbatten, who did not know of this claim till later, was prepared to recognise the League as the mouthpiece of the Resistance and agreed that S.O.E. should encourage and strengthen it by all available means, since from the military point of view that was obviously commonsense. The remaining two chief characters, Stilwell and Chiang Kai-Shek, though still in the story have begun to move out of the plot. Both are engaged on an undertaking which will become subsidiary, for the re-opening of the land connection between China and the West was to have little effect on the defeat of Japan in the Pacific or in Burma. Very soon we shall see Stilwell disappear altogether and Chiang recede till his actions no longer have importance for us.

Dorman-Smith's great desire to regain for Britain Burmese regard, lost by our failure to protect them and our slowness in meeting their political wishes, and his ardent ambition to be himself the re-builder of their prosperity and the inaugurator of their

## *The end of Stilwell*

new state as a Dominion, will by now be fully understood. How delicate he foresaw his task to be is revealed in the correspondence. There are two letters to Amery dated August 1944. In one he writes: 'If the Cabinet is going to adopt an intransigent attitude over the constitutional aspect . . . then we are foredoomed to failure.' He goes on to discuss what should first be done on his return. Get communications working and have a police force able to maintain internal security. These preliminaries assured, rice, the staple industry, could be planted, reaped and exported. (Half the land had gone out of cultivation.) Next, public health and veterinary services to be restored on an increased scale. Importation in quantity of such commodities as cloth; (the villager is down to a single garment and that in rags). So much was clear enough, but how to overcome the public distrust of a Governor ruling under Section 139? Direct rule was no doubt a good device for getting things done quickly, but it would get nothing done unless the people admitted its necessity. That they would never admit if they did not know how long it was to last. If reconstruction seemed to be delaying the grant of political sovereignty, they would not co-operate, however sound and generous were the plans. They would rather run their own show and be poor, than wait indefinitely while they were being handsomely set up. Our wisest, most liberal, schemes would have little appeal if imposed on them when it was liberty they wanted. One was bound to admit that under direct rule they would have less freedom than before the war or under the Japanese. It would take a very clever Public Relations department to smooth that over. To say to the Burmese: 'Well, if you refuse to accept direct rule, we won't give you any money,' would invite the retort: 'Keep your money, then. We are ready to suffer to achieve our freedom.'

Such were the true intuitions of Burmese feeling which the letters show passed through Dorman-Smith's mind at this time. It did not look as if H.M.G.'s policy had much chance, unless the Burmese could be induced to trust him. For him to say: 'The sooner we get the job done of restoring the country, the sooner you will get your freedom,' would sound like another variant of the old promise that Dominion Status was just round the corner.

## *The end of Stilwell*

But somehow or other he must convince them that they could rely on him to see them through.

Mountbatten had moved his headquarters in April from Delhi to Kandy, the hill station in central Ceylon, a change of place that gave him greater freedom and a more central position. In May he made a representation to the Chiefs of Staff which illustrates the trend of his mind and the broad manner in which he interpreted the directive which I have quoted. He was responsible for the internal security of the island. The inhabitants were agitating for political reforms. On the ground that if this agitation were ignored, labour and the public services would probably strike and military operations be adversely affected, he moved the Home Government through the Chiefs of Staff to send out a commission to enquire into the political situation.

Though Dorman-Smith was engaged in long-term planning and Mountbatten in short-term, and their duties and responsibilities did not overlap, it was to the interest of both that they should be acquainted generally with each other's standpoints. Towards the end of October 1944, when the British invasion of Burma was beginning, Dorman-Smith went to Kandy for an exchange of views. In a letter to Amery of 30 October he says: 'The meeting was a very satisfactory one. Mountbatten, while protesting that policy questions were no concern of his,<sup>1</sup> was enthusiastic. I was rather surprised that he should fall in with my views so readily.' The conversation touched on the advisability of a statement by H.M.G. and of a liberal attitude to the Burmese and their constitutional hopes. Dorman-Smith here adds a curious fact: 'Denning<sup>2</sup> (M.E. Denning of the Foreign Office and Mountbatten's Chief Political Adviser) apparently wants to go much further than I do and to announce that full self-government will be granted to Burma just as soon as we can negotiate a treaty with her, which we might be able to do in a very few months after the return of civil government.' At this time no one in Kandy knew that the A.F.P.F. League had been set up in August and claimed to be the provisional Government of Burma with which such a

<sup>1</sup>i.e. civil policy after the war was over.

<sup>2</sup>Later Sir Esler Denning, K.C.M.G., H.M. Ambassador to Japan.



13. General Aung San in London, January 1947



*'Illustrated' photograph*

14. General Aung San and U Nu walking in the streets of Rangoon attended by their staff (1946 or 1947). Aung San is in front and wearing Burmese costume, U Nu is immediately behind him in the centre

## *The end of Stilwell*

treaty should be negotiated.<sup>1</sup> What Mr Dening is recorded as having said was very prescient, as it foreshadowed what in fact did happen. Dorman-Smith was impressed by Mountbatten, and with a spontaneous good nature characteristic of him told Amery: 'He is both efficient and charming, a wonderful host and a terrific worker. I have never seen a better run house. . . . He is a very determined man who knows what he wants and will not be satisfied until he gets it.'

Stilwell, who was, as I have mentioned, Deputy Supreme Allied Commander, stayed in Kandy all August when he acted as Supremo during a visit Mountbatten paid to England. Since we must take leave of him in this chapter, let us listen once again to his voice. His diary reveals the man so vividly that he jumps on the page and tears your texture. But it can't be helped. You must have Joe Stilwell. What would *Henry IV* be without Falstaff? His tragedy was that Roosevelt sent him to do a job which was heart-breaking and also turned out not to be of first importance. On top of that, as we shall see, he was grievously treated. Others, too, had their disappointments, but they had the satisfaction of being associated with decisive events. Nevertheless, Stilwell was a great figure in the scene because of his astonishing personality. That he found words to reveal it is an additional reason why he will go down to posterity.

He was in the jungle by Myitkyina when on 11 June he heard that he was to act for Mountbatten in August. 'Louis wants to know what about it. Well, what about it?' Kandy would be a nice change from the Hukawng in the monsoon. ('Rain, rain, rain, mud, mud, mud, typhus, malaria, dysentery, exhaustion, rotting feet, body sores.') His opinion of Mountbatten had gone up and down. Of him on their first meeting in India on 7 October 1943 he had written: 'Louis is a good egg . . . full of enthusiasm and also of disgust with inertia and conservatism.' In March 1944 he confides to his wife: 'Louis and I get along famously even if he does have curly eyelashes.' But he was soon to learn that Mountbatten wanted to reorganise the China command, in which case

<sup>1</sup>The Burma Defence Army soldiers captured in September had, as related, only given S.O.E. a very limited account of the August manifesto.

## *The end of Stilwell*

he might have to go. The fact was that from the time of Hutton and Alexander his position had always been ambiguous: he commanded the Chinese armies and did not command them; he was under the British C.-in-C. and not under him; he was Roosevelt's agent to keep Chiang in the war, but he and Chiang hated each other so much that there was always the danger of Chiang leaving the war. Mountbatten thought that a more efficient arrangement could be made and told Stilwell in May 1944 that he was raising the matter with the Joint Chiefs of Staff.<sup>1</sup>

Stilwell arrived at Kandy on 1 August in time to say goodbye to the Supremo. ('Little Willie, the Country Boy, had to come down and take over. This is a laugh. A goddam American in the driver's seat.') Next day he was promoted a full General with four stars. 'Same as before, no thrill,' he comments. The ceremonial of the great staff, said to number two thousand, irritated him. 'The sequence of endless meetings which occupied the attention of the higher brass'<sup>2</sup> seemed a waste of time. He resolved to do nothing and told Lt.-General Pownall,<sup>3</sup> the Chief of Staff, to 'run the show'.<sup>4</sup> He himself went sightseeing in the island. 'Ceylon exceeds the advertising. In contrast with north Burma, this is paradise.' On 24 August Mountbatten returned. Stilwell wrote to his wife: 'I went down to Colombo to welcome Mountbatten on his return. I went to the zoo first to look at the monkeys just to get in the mood. He was not at ease with me which is not surprising because his trip had to do with an operation on his deputy's throat.' Whether Mountbatten had again raised the question of reorganising the China command, I do not know, but evidently Stilwell thought he had.

When Stilwell was back in north Burma, his relations with Chiang Kai-Shek, bad for a long time, grew worse. The capture of Myitkyina town in August 1944 had been a triumph. ('What a

<sup>1</sup>Lord Mountbatten's Despatch, para. 266.

<sup>2</sup>The words used by Theodore H. White, the editor of *The Stilwell Papers*.

<sup>3</sup>Lt.-General Sir Henry Pownall, K.C.B., K.B.E., D.S.O., M.C.

<sup>4</sup>The truth was that Stilwell, essentially a fighting General, was not competent (and knew it) to preside at top level staff meetings.



## *The end of Stilwell*

bitter dose that was for the Limeys. They said it was impossible so often.') But Chiang had not taken advantage of the victory to order the Yunnan army down to Myitkyina and so reopen the road to China. What had happened to the Chinese armies in Burma when sent to aid in stemming the Japanese invasion two years before, no doubt gave him pause. His caution was the cause of mutual recrimination. And other grave differences increased the tension. ('The crazy little bastard. . . . He is impossible. . . . I am fed up with smiling at rattlesnakes.') In a September letter of Stilwell's to his wife, where he gives his address as The Manure Pile, he says: 'We are in the midst of a battle with the Peanut and it is wearing us out.' The crisis was reached on 17 September. On this day he was ordered to deliver personally to Chiang a telegram from Roosevelt. Its exact terms have not been revealed, but it sharply rebuked the Generalissimo for his procrastinations. 'Mark this day in red. . . . At long, at very long last, F.D.R. has finally spoken plain words. . . . "Get busy or else." I handed this bundle of paprika to the Peanut and then sank back with a sigh. . . . Beyond turning green and losing the power of speech, he did not bat an eye. . . . The dope is that after I left the screaming began and lasted into the night.'

To Chiang it was an insupportable loss of face to be handed such a rebuke by his subordinate. To regain face he immediately asked Roosevelt to recall Stilwell. Roosevelt was obliged to yield. American policy was such that to risk an open breach with Chiang was impossible. (1 October 'The Peanut has gone off his rocker and Roosevelt has apparently let me down completely. My conscience is clear. I have carried out my orders. I have no regrets.') The recall came on 19 October. That Roosevelt had no alternative Stilwell admits. He had become *persona non grata*. He had to go. But the blow was more than he could stand. And it does not seem that Roosevelt softened it for him, as he could have done privately. Old, weary and heartbroken, Stilwell died soon after his return home. The most extraordinary character of the Burma scene, his epitaph remains to be written. The command he had held was split up amongst three Generals, an arrangement which from the first Mountbatten had represented would make for

### *The end of Stilwell*

greater efficiency. But, in fact, as I have stated, the Chinese forces contributed little or nothing to the reconquest of Burma and the defeat of Japan.

## CHAPTER XXVI

### *Burma policy debated in the House of Commons*

**I**n December 1944 a committee of young conservative M.P.s under the chairmanship of Mr de Chair published a paper called 'Blue Print for Burma' after examining what witnesses they could collect in England. As the witnesses of necessity were for the most part officials retired from the Burma services or on duty in London and directors of the Rangoon firms, and did not include any Burmese, certainly none in touch with the A.F.P.F. League, the Blue Print represented British rather than Burmese opinion. Nevertheless, its recommendations were somewhat in advance of the position taken up so far by the Government. The main proposal was that the Governor on his return to Burma should exercise direct rule under S.139 of the 1935 Act for a definite period of six years, during which time he and an advisory Council should, besides restoring the country to normal, draw up a new constitution for Burma giving her the status of a Dominion.

We have already seen the importance attached by Dorman-Smith to the fixing of a definite date in this connection and know that he hoped, if it were conceded, that the Burmese would co-operate in his programme. Mr de Chair and his committee, no doubt, had had the advantage of consulting the Secretary of State and so were able to recommend the very thing which both Amery and Dorman-Smith had been hoping to get Churchill to agree to. This gave him reason to think that his committee had contributed a proposal which would be found widely acceptable.

## *Burma policy debated in the House of Commons*

A Commons debate on the Blue Print was fixed for 12 December. I was introduced by the present Lord Astor to Mr de Chair at a luncheon in the House and found him very sympathetic towards the Burmese. The *Observer* had asked me to write an article on the debate and I was given a ticket for the gallery. Mr de Chair opened the debate and urged the House to accept what he felt were liberal and constructive proposals. Nothing could have been more agreeable and conciliatory than the tone adopted by the subsequent speakers 'who, without exception', as I wrote, 'emphasised their regard for the Burmese, and declared them to be the victims of a catastrophe, for which they could in no way be blamed, during the terrible course of which they had done for us, their fellow victims, all that lay in their power, facilitating the escape of our troops, which would have been impossible had they turned against us.' Mr Amery wound up the debate, but, as the Cabinet had not yet declared its policy towards Burma, could not say more than that he hoped in a not too distant future to make a precise announcement.

As I listened to the debate I was surprised at the Commons' goodwill, which seemed much warmer than hitherto and perhaps reflected a change in public opinion towards our dependencies. Nevertheless, in my *Observer* article I felt bound to say that the de Chair Committee's proposals, even if accepted by the Government which they had not been, did not go far enough. 'Our Burmese critics, let us hope, will be indulgent,' I said, 'be slow to distrust us, be patient and co-operative. But my own frank opinion is that chance of a happy issue in Burma remains faint.' The only course which would serve, I concluded, would be to open discussions immediately on our return with representatives of the people on the details of the Dominion constitution which for so long we had promised to bestow. At that time, like everyone else in England, I had never heard of Aung San, General of the Burma Defence Army, and Than Tun, organiser of the A.F.P.F. League, and had no conception of what had been happening inside Burma. All I knew was what the ordinary Burmese had told me ten years before.

Mr Battersby in his papers relating to his experiences in Special

### *Burma policy debated in the House of Commons*

Operations Executive states that in this December 1944 ten Burmese sent by Than Tun got in contact with a post of that organisation on the frontier and were flown to Calcutta, where he interrogated them. From them he first learnt of the A.F.P.F. League. From that date Special Operations Executive was in direct touch with the headquarters of the League and supplied by air money, printing presses, wireless sets and some arms. Hitherto it had been supplying these requirements only to outlying sections of the Resistance. Mr Battersby also records that the last sentence of Than Tun's first wireless signal to S.O.E. read: 'Don't like Blue Print for Burma.' This, says Mr Battersby, was rather a shock, because he and his colleagues and, indeed, everyone he knew, thought the Blue Print made a reasonable offer, which the Burmese could accept. The news had not yet come through that the leaders of the League claimed to be a Provisional Government and would not recognise the old Government when it returned. Nevertheless, it must have been evident that to work with the League might be embarrassing later, since its views evidently differed from the Government's. But as S.O.E. was concerned only with easing the path for the army by organising sabotage and rebellion behind the Japanese lines, it left political complications to take care of themselves.

## CHAPTER XXVII

### *Aung San comes over*

Meanwhile Mountbatten's invasion of Burma was continuing, led by Slim.<sup>1</sup> When commanding 1 Burcorps in 1942 Slim had had two divisions; now his force, the Fourteenth Army, consisted of seven divisions and two armoured brigades. Before, his planes gave out; now he dominated the air. Air mastery solved his communications problem. The poor roads over the mountains of the Burma-India divide could not alone have carried his supplies. Air transport was the logistic key. True, the Japanese could oppose him with more troops than he could bring to bear. Their rail, road and river communications with Rangoon were greatly superior to his hill roads. But their heavy defeat in India had shaken them, as must also have the news of their naval disasters in the Pacific. Their air inferiority, too, was a fatal weakness, and their generalship throughout was rigid and unimaginative. Moreover, British armour was superior, a factor of importance when the battle reached the dry zone of Upper Burma. Indeed, the Japanese feared for that reason to stand in the plain of Shwebo and retreated quickly across the Irrawaddy to strong points in the Mandalay and Meiktila districts. Slim's brilliant stroke against them there will be given the praise it deserves by future historians. He feinted north of Mandalay but threw his main force across the river at Pakokku, eighty miles south. This half encircled the enemy and threatened their communications with Rangoon. On 4 March 1945 Meiktila was taken. By then Slim had crossed the Irrawaddy north of Mandalay. In a rapid

<sup>1</sup>Now Field-Marshal Sir William Slim, G.C.B., Governor-General of Australia.

### *Aung San comes over*

series of battles the whole of Upper Burma was retaken, Mandalay falling on 21 March. The remnant of the Japanese army fell back on its bases in the south. But if the campaign were to be finished before the monsoon broke, Slim had to be in Rangoon by 15 May. The race for the capital began.

During the advance touch had been kept with the Resistance. As the Burma Defence Army only numbered ten thousand at most, for it to rise prematurely against the Japanese would only have invited its destruction. But the moment had now arrived when it could come over with effect.

Mountbatten's despatch contains a full account<sup>1</sup> of his dealings with General Aung San and the Resistance. He begins by relating how on 18 February 1945 Force 136 (also referred to in my text as Special Operations Executive or S.O.E.) asked him to review an order by Lt. General Leese<sup>2</sup> forbidding any further distribution of arms to the Burma Defence Army. General Leese had given the order at the instance of Major General Pearce, the head of the Civil Affairs Service, the military administration which followed the army and took charge of areas as they were reconquered. Pearce, as an Indian Civilian of the Burma *cadre*, had twenty years' experience of Burmese affairs. In his opinion the further issue of arms to the Burma Defence Army would imperil the present and future security of the country, as it would be tantamount to arming the political left wing. That it was a national front he did not concede.

Mountbatten, however, in response to S.O.E.'s appeal, decided against Pearce. He says: 'The Commander of Force 136 argued that a strengthened guerrilla movement in Burma would greatly assist his own operations behind the enemy lines. . . . We had already armed Kachin, Karen, Naga and Lushai scouts as guerrillas among the hill tribes.' If he, Mountbatten, now discouraged the Resistance movement in Burma proper, he would not only be refusing what help the Resistance might give, but 'be in the predicament of having to suppress the Burma Defence Army and

<sup>1</sup>See para. 487 *seq.* in part B, and para. 61 *seq.* of part C.

<sup>2</sup>Lt. General Sir Oliver Leese, Bt., K.C.B., the C.-in-C. of the Allied Land Forces, South East Asia.

### *Aung San comes over*

to divert to this task troops who should be fighting the Japanese.' Moreover, 'to prevent the Burmese fighting the common enemy and helping to liberate their own country could not fail to have unfavourable repercussions in the United Kingdom, the United States, and in other parts of the world.' For these reasons he overruled General Leese and Major General Pearce and on 24 February directed that the issue of arms should continue, though with suitable precautions.

It will be agreed that the reasons advanced by Lord Mountbatten have their military cogency. One perceives, however, that they look beyond the immediate. Indeed, the situation was such that it could not be disinfected from its wider implications. We are here dealing with a matter which eventuated in the secession from the Commonwealth of one of the Crown's largest possessions. Mountbatten could not know that this would happen, yet felt he was dealing with problems where military policy and statesmanship were inextricably mingled, as they always are in a long view. He conceived it to be his duty to avoid a military policy which would be politically harmful. His advisers in the Civil Affairs Service declared co-operation with Aung San would be politically harmful. His reply was that not to do so would in a wide view be more harmful. Moreover, was he not running only a trifling risk? He would himself be administering Burma for some months after the defeat of the Japanese. Surely, as the head of a great and victorious army and supported by a brilliant staff, he would be able to exercise a decisive influence on Aung San, be able to control the Burmese forces, disarm them at leisure, win over their leaders and prevent any of their adherents from disturbing the peace?

We see here the root of what was to grow into a difference of opinion between him and Dorman-Smith. Dorman-Smith had been advised by Paw Tun and his officials that the League did not represent the Burmese nation, but was a revolutionary faction, to support and arm which would jeopardise a reasonable settlement. Mountbatten, besides the military reasons he had for working with the League, felt that to flout it would antagonise the Burmese as a whole, though, as already stated, he did not yet know that it



### *Aung San comes over*

claimed to represent the whole nation and to be its provisional government.

The arming of the Burma Defence Army turned out in the event to be of little moment. That force had already been armed by the Japanese and no arms that the British might send could reach its main body until after it revolted. Only secret bands of partisans in the jungle could be armed at first. Moreover, in addition to arms officially provided by the Japanese, the Burma army had its own hidden dumps of arms, collected during the turmoil of the invasion of 1942, dumps which would be multiplied many times as the Japanese defeat turned into a rout.

By March when Slim had crossed the Irrawaddy and was on the Meiktila plain, news was received, says Mountbatten, 'that the Burma Defence Army would leave Rangoon for the front on 16 March: but that this was a cover-plan, to enable them to take up their positions before showing their hands.' Aung San had made the Japanese believe that his soldiers ardently desired to support them in the battle with the advancing British, and he was allowed to march north. Indeed, the Burma army had a great send-off; the Japanese were jubilant that the Burmese were so loyal to them. Ba Maw smiled; he was in the secret. It was one of those tricks so much to Burmese taste. By 25 March some of the Burmese regiments were at Prome on the Irrawaddy and some at Toungoo on the Rangoon-Mandalay railway. Though separated still by a hundred miles from the British front, they sent word that they intended at once to revolt. 'It seemed clear,' says Mountbatten, 'that the rising would take place before the end of the month whether we supported it or not. After careful consideration I ordered that it should be given maximum support.' The Burmese troops might not be able to inflict serious losses, but at least they would be an embarrassment to the Japanese at a moment when the British were about to make a dash for Rangoon. The psychological effect, moreover, would be great. The Japanese would certainly be disconcerted and the whole Burmese population stimulated to receive the British as friends.

Mountbatten took care to acquaint the Chiefs of Staff fully with all the circumstances, including the fact that the Civil Affairs

### *Aung San comes over*

Service held different views. On 30 March the War Cabinet wired its approval of his plans, at the same time stressing that no bargain should be struck with the leaders of the Resistance by giving them any political promises. Rather, they should be warned that only exemplary conduct now could condone their past collaboration with the enemy.

On 27 March the army, renamed the Burma National Army, rose in revolt. Mountbatten notes that at this outbreak they killed some seven hundred Japanese, including two Generals. In the operations which followed, they 'tied down a number of troops which could otherwise have been used to block the British army on its drive to Rangoon.'

Aung San did not immediately present himself at Slim's headquarters. When Mountbatten, as noted above, asked sanction from the Chiefs of Staff to accept Aung San's offer and give the Burma National Army every assistance, he had pointed out to them 'that there was some danger from the Civil Affairs point of view that offence might be given to the more respectable elements of the population. But I had reminded them that the respectable elements had remained inactive; while it was the active, politically conscious and politically organised elements in the country who were about to undertake the rising'.<sup>1</sup> He went on to say that though Aung San was guilty of treason for his march in with the Japanese in 1942, he had done so because he believed at that time that the Japanese would grant Burma political freedom. In supporting him and the rising the British would be doing no more than they had done in Italy and other European countries 'where the satellites of a power which had let them down were accepted as co-belligerents on our side'. To bring over the Burmese national heroes (for as such they were bound to be regarded) would make them heroes with, rather than against, the British, and so render it difficult, if not impossible, for them to pose as our opponents. The War Cabinet's acceptance of these views, with the reservations we have seen, and the admission of Aung San as a co-belligerent, amounted to a recognition of him as an ally.

<sup>1</sup>Lord Mountbatten's Despatch, part C, para. 61.

### *Aung San comes over*

Mountbatten relates that early in April, when the race for Rangoon had commenced, but before Aung San had come to army headquarters, he held a series of meetings with the Burma Civil Government and senior Civil Affairs officers to explain the policy which he would direct the latter to adopt until such time as the Civil Government was restored. Dorman-Smith was in London in April, whither he had gone to discuss his plans for reconstruction with the Cabinet. Sir John Wise was acting for him and in that capacity attended the meetings. In explaining his policy, Mountbatten made it clear that he did not blame the Burmese leaders for collaborating with the Japanese. (As we have seen, their collaboration, except for Aung San's march in, was, in fact, a make-believe, as the Resistance started almost at once, though Mountbatten did not know this.) He said that British reputation in the eyes of the world would depend on how they handled the A.F.P.F. League. 'If the political leaders (of the League) and their followers who were fighting in the Burma National Army had decided that they would get a fairer deal from the British (than from the Japanese) I felt it my duty to see that they should not revise this opinion.' And he went on to refer to Smuts and Botha and to declare that Britain should extend the same clemency to the leaders of the League and 'convince the Burmese . . . of the sincerity of our desire to help them to help themselves'. Crimes would have to be punished and order kept, but political misdemeanours would not be treated as crimes. And he added: 'I made it clear at these meetings that, while taking into consideration the views of my Civil Affairs officers and those which Sir Reginald Dorman-Smith and his advisers had expressed to me from time to time, I reserved to myself all policy decisions to be taken in South-East Asia.' Nevertheless, he would leave the Civil Affairs Service as free a hand as possible and 'avoid prejudicing the situation which would confront the Civil Government on its return'.

On 2 May the British retook Rangoon and what remained of the Japanese army fled eastwards towards Moulmein, carrying the Adipati, Ba Maw, along with them. Slim, anxious to come to a personal understanding with Aung San, asked S.O.E. to convey

### *Aung San comes over*

an invitation to him to visit army headquarters. He came on 16 May. There followed a remarkable interview between the two. Aung San announced in the bluff forthright manner characteristic of him that he was the military representative of the Provisional Government of Burma, set up by the League in August 1944, and in which he held the portfolio of Minister of War. As no news of this had previously reached Slim, he heard the Burmese General's claim with surprise and incredulity. He took it to be a piece of bluff. Aung San, however, quite undaunted and calm, as was his wont, went on to explain that he was speaking as an envoy of the League. It was the League which had determined on seeking alliance with the British and would continue in alliance until the Japanese were driven from Burmese soil and surrendered. Thereafter its intention was to establish an independent national government. Nothing could have been more blunt and less diplomatic than his manner of speech. He was delivering a message, making a statement of fact. He was not asking British intentions, but declaring the League's.

Slim had his instructions from Mountbatten, who had told him to follow closely the directive of 31 March from the Chiefs of Staff and the War Cabinet, the main point of which was that 'if Major General Aung San should ask our intentions for the future government of Burma, it should be made clear that we were not prepared to discuss political issues'.<sup>1</sup> Accordingly he evaded meeting Aung San's political claims and replied that 'no Civil Government of any kind could operate as long as the Military Administration was in force.'<sup>2</sup> The Military Administration would remain in force until after the Japanese surrendered. Meanwhile he asked Aung San to incorporate his army in the British army. To this Aung San replied that, as an ally, he was ready to place his army under the Allied Commander in the field, but that he was unwilling to owe allegiance to anyone except to the Provisional Government of Burma.

On this startling news being reported to Mountbatten, he asked the instructions of the Chiefs of Staff, informing them that

<sup>1</sup>Lord Mountbatten's Despatch, section B, para. 497.

<sup>2</sup>Idem, section C, para 71.

### *Aung San comes over*

he regarded the Provisional Government as a fiction, but advising that the League be accepted for what in fact it was, a coalition of all the political parties. At the same time he asked Dorman-Smith, who by now had returned from London to Simla, that Slim 'be allowed to tell Major General Aung San that His Excellency would consider the eventual inclusion of members of the A.F.P.F. League in his Executive Council, when the Civil Government was restored'. To which request he records that Dorman-Smith 'telegraphed that he could not for a moment consider giving an undertaking to consider this'. This reply was a shock to him, as it was inconsistent with his policy of conciliating the League. It was further evidence that his viewpoint differed from Dorman-Smith's. Dorman-Smith did not wish to commit himself in advance to recognise the League as a political party of importance, far less to recognise it as a coalition of all parties. Bowing to this, Mountbatten refrained from giving Aung San any political assurances, though he did not change the opinion which he was forming that Aung San's co-operation was essential if a peaceful settlement were to be reached.

It will be noticed that the Cabinet was in fact sponsoring two policies. It had authorised Mountbatten through the Chiefs of Staff to treat with Aung San as a co-belligerent and acquiesced in the view that he represented a coalition commanding the largest following in the country. But its instructions through the Secretary of State to Dorman-Smith were that he should return in due course to Burma for an as yet undefined period of direct rule under Section 139 of the 1935 Act. The first policy, even if no political promises were made (though Mountbatten was urging that at least some political bait be held out) was bound to increase Aung San's popular standing and power, a state of things which would make it more difficult to carry out the second policy. It was as if the Cabinet had not brought together into a coherent whole its political and military plans.

Let us now attempt to penetrate Aung San's intentions. Without artifice he had frankly declared his situation as he understood it. He perceived that the Army, though ready to recognise him up to a point, did not take seriously his contention that the

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League was a Provisional Government. But he did not abandon the claim, though he said no more of it. He decided to make a show of co-operating with the British, just as he had seemed to co-operate with the Japanese. He would obey orders or appear to obey them. When in the power of the Japanese he had dissimulated; now in British power he would dissimulate again. He had no intention of giving his army away. He might have to allow some part of it to be merged in the British army; might have to place some arms in British armouries. But as before, that would be a cover. He would camouflage his army and retain it in being; though he surrendered a few arms, he would keep his underground stocks. The Military Administration would soon be going. He would bide his time. Even if his army were disbanded, the League would remain. The League could call another army into being. The League was the Resistance. The Resistance had been founded to combat both the British and the Japanese. The Japanese had gone, the British had returned. Only half the Resistance's task was done. It would continue till the whole was complete.

As for Mountbatten there was always at the back of his mind the thought that Burma could be kept within the Commonwealth only by winning the League's confidence. That could best be done by inducing its leaders, particularly Aung San, to see honour and freedom in a close association with the British. As things were, the League with its military counterpart, the Burma Defence Army, evidently intended to stand out. It was his duty as a military commander to try to take away from them the military power which would enable them to do so. But his ideas went beyond disarming the League. He wanted to persuade Aung San that by guiding Burmese opinion towards a *rapprochement* he would be leading his country to a great place in the world, with freedom as large as she would have if she stood alone, and even wider opportunities. This, Mountbatten conceived, could only be achieved by convincing Aung San that the British wanted him, would support him, would pay him every respect and honour, had no underhand intention of tricking or using him and would always employ their influence to maintain him in the first place. Mountbatten's



*Sport and General Press Agency photograph*

15. Lord and Lady Mountbatten on the platform of the Shwedagon Pagoda, Rangoon



*Central Press photograph\**

16. U Nu as he is today (London 1955)



### *Aung San comes over*

plan hinged on whether in fact Aung San was the people's choice. That was not admitted by the Cabinet, by most senior British officials nor by the older Burmese politicians. The British Government would have to be induced to change its policy, and the old politicians would have to be abandoned. As we shall see, this eventually happened eighteen months afterwards. But it was then too late to satisfy the Burmese that an association with the British within the Commonwealth would give them the honour and freedom which they valued above all else. Lord Mountbatten has told me that he believes that if it had been left to him at this stage, from June 1945 onwards, to conduct the affairs of Burma and, when the time came to restore a Civil Government, if a man sharing his opinions had been appointed as Governor, his hopes would have been realised. How different this outlook was from that of Major General Pearce and the senior officers of the Civil Affairs Service the following fact will illustrate. As we have seen, from the first they did not like the idea of making use of the Burma Independence Army, but were overruled. Shortly after the recapture of Rangoon they represented that Aung San would henceforth be more trouble than he was worth and advised that the League and its army be now declared illegal and Aung San be arrested and tried as a traitor. Mountbatten rejected this advice and soon afterwards replaced Major General Pearce by Major General Rance.

The historian, oppressed enough by the task of establishing what did happen, is discouraged from pursuing the will-o'-the-wisp of what might have happened, for once he interferes with the actual march of events countless imponderables arise to confuse him. Nevertheless, in this case it is of interest to record that at this time there was a body of official opinion which held that to placate Aung San and the League was needless, and that all would go smoothly for the Cabinet's policy, as far as it was then known, if Aung San and his colleagues were put out of the way. Speculation as to what would happen if this course were taken continued to agitate opinion for the next twelve months.

## CHAPTER XXVIII

### *The Speech on the Cumberland*

**D**orman-Smith was back from London in Simla on 4 May, the decisive week in the World War, for three days later the Germans surrendered. His lengthy discussions with Whitehall on Burma's rehabilitation had ended satisfactorily. His plans were accepted and he was assured of Treasury support. He was also told that His Majesty's Government would shortly be making a statement, in the form of a White Paper, to declare its future policy towards Burma.

On 17 May the White Paper was published. The Civil Government would return to Burma when the military situation allowed. The Governor's period of direct rule under S.139 of the 1935 Act would be three years. At the end of that time, if not earlier, an election would be held and the Burmese Council and Legislature as established by the 1935 Act would be restored. A second phase in constitutional development would then begin. Representatives of all parties would be asked to draw up a democratic constitution, so framed as to give Burma full self government within the Commonwealth. As soon as it was clear that the draft constitution had enough support to justify endorsement by Parliament, an agreement would be entered into between H.M.G. and the representatives of Burma, and the constitution would come into force. But the hill areas inhabited by the Chins, Shans, Karens, Kachins and other non-Burmese races would be excluded, until those peoples expressed a desire to amalgamate their territories with Burma proper.

This policy was an advance in the matter of the length of direct rule. H.M.G. hitherto had refused to state its length;

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Dorman-Smith had begged for a stated length and suggested seven years; Mr de Chair's Blue Print suggested six years; a period of three years was now fixed as the maximum. After three years the Burmese would be back again where they were in 1942. The length of the second stage, however, was not stated. It was impossible to deduce from the text how long it would be before Dominion Status was granted.

The gap was very great between this policy and what the A.F.P.F. League demanded. As we have seen, the League required that there should be no period of direct rule and that it should be recognised as a sovereign Provisional Government competent to found a republic, in which all the inhabitants of Burma would be included. If there was one item more than another which it could not accept in the White Paper, it was the one to exclude the hill territories, half the total area of Burma.

Dorman-Smith had not yet been apprised of the League's demands. It was only on 16 May, the day before the publication of the White Paper, that Aung San had propounded them to Slim, who, moreover, had not taken them seriously. Nevertheless, Dorman-Smith had had enough experience of Burmese demands in the past to guess that it would not be easy to gain acceptance for the White Paper. True, there had been a substantial concession on the length of direct rule, but the rest of the text was, as he wrote to Amery, 'infuriatingly vague'. The way it was interpreted would, of course, make a great difference. Amery himself, in a very liberal speech introducing the Paper, had shown what could be done in that direction. Wouldn't it be a good thing if he (Dorman-Smith) paid a short visit to Rangoon and explained to the leading politicians there how the Paper could be made to work? If that were done, 'I feel certain we will be able to put the policy across and get the co-operation of the people as a whole,' he ends optimistically. Amery agreed, but as it would be awkward for a civil governor to land while the country was under military administration, it was arranged that he should address the Burmese leaders on a British warship in the Rangoon River. The date fixed was 20 June.

Meanwhile Aung San and the League were coming into more

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prominence. On 15 June there was a victory parade in Rangoon. Of this occasion Mountbatten writes in his Despatch: 'The Burmese flag was among those flown at the saluting base, and the units representing British Empire and Allied forces included . . . a detachment from the Burma National Army.' The Burma National Army was able to represent this as recognition of its allied status. Next day Mountbatten records that he gave Aung San and his colleague Thakin Than Tun, Secretary General of the League, a private interview. He was anxious to obtain their co-operation in suppressing the disorders in the country districts. 'Armed bands who were—or claimed to be—members of the Burma National Army were giving considerable trouble. Major General Aung San agreed to issue written orders to such units, instructing them to obey my local military commanders, even to the extent of giving up their arms and being disbanded.' (Paras. 78 and 79 of Despatch) Aung San promised to co-operate and now agreed also that the Burma National Army should be absorbed into the regular Burma Army, at least those of his soldiers who volunteered to join. Those who did not volunteer would be disbanded and Mountbatten promised to give them a gratuity for their services in the Allied cause. Such negotiations between the Supreme Allied Commander in person and the Commander of the Burma National Army impressed the public. It seems to have been about this time that Aung San began to use the style, *Bogyok*, which means Supreme Commander. His age—only twenty-nine—made it seem all the more extraordinary; he must be the man of destiny the country awaited.

Mountbatten discussed with Dorman-Smith who should be invited to the meeting on board the warship. He says that he favoured Dorman-Smith's wish to send separate invitations to the leaders of the old established political parties, as to invite only the League's representatives might seem a recognition of the self-styled Provisional Government, even though the League was said to be a national front, and so to include all parties. Nevertheless, he thought that the importance of the meeting lay in the opportunity it afforded for discussion with the leaders of the League, Aung San and Than Tun, for they were the only poten-

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tial trouble-makers and so the only people worth making an effort to win over.

On 20 June Dorman-Smith arrived in Rangoon by air and went aboard H.M.S. *Cumberland*, which was in the river. Before the meeting began he was handed a newspaper-man's report of a recent public meeting of the League, wherein were set out its demands, together with the outline of a constitution for a Burmese republic. This was the first time he had seen the demands stated in detail, though a few days previously, just before starting for Rangoon, he had received from the League a shorter paper to the same effect. Its perusal had shown him that the difficulty of getting the White Paper accepted would be greater than he expected, if the League was what it purported to be. He had composed a speech, however, which put so liberal an interpretation on the White Paper that he had good hopes of carrying the day, at least with all opinion except the most extreme. Indeed, his chief fear was that the Cabinet would round on him for exceeding his instructions and promising more than they intended.

The speech was a moving appeal for co-operation. He said that he was animated by two ardent desires—to repair the damage done by the war and to see full self-government established in the shortest possible time. He could not succeed in either without Burmese help. Burma's fight for freedom was over. He begged his hearers to believe that. All her aspirations would now be satisfied. She would achieve as much freedom as Britain herself. Self-government was no longer just round the corner. It was within easy sight. Though direct rule had been fixed at a maximum of three years, it could be ended sooner, if the election to re-establish the 1935 constitution could sooner be held. Let them all combine and try to abbreviate the period. The quicker direct rule was ended, the happier he would be. After all, there had to be some sort of caretaker government for the moment. If, as he intended, he was able to associate with him in an advisory Council the best brains of all parties, what Government could be better? As for the second stage after the 1935 parliamentary constitution had been restored, there was no reason why the promised dominion status constitution should not be drafted very quickly.

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There was nothing inelastic in the programme as he saw it. Short cuts would be found, stages could be telescoped. Finally, turning to Aung San and Than Tun, he assured them that he could see practically no difference between such an interpretation of the White Paper and what they demanded. Give him a chance and he would lead them quicker and more surely to full self-government than any other arrangement could effect.

There is no doubt that this was the most liberal and warm-hearted speech ever made by a Governor of Burma. It appealed for goodwill and trust and promised full satisfaction, given the time necessary to assure it. An excellent impression was made on all the moderates present, who, indeed, were much moved. But the speech was quite unacceptable to the League, for many reasons, but especially for the capital reason that the League was in power and was not prepared to make Dorman-Smith a present of its power.

In his letter to Amery written immediately after his return to Simla a few days later, Dorman-Smith gives further interesting details about the meeting. Including Aung San and Than Tun, seventeen persons had been invited. Some of them had been his Ministers before the invasion. There was also Sir Maung Gye, his former Burmese Counsellor. After the speech was over he had talks with them separately in a private cabin. Their appearance was a shock, 'because nearly every one of them was but a ghost of his former self', so greatly had they suffered under the Japanese. 'They were old, pale, haggard and frightened. My old Councillor, Maung Gye, I could hardly recognise. It was not what they said to me—it was the way they said it and the way they looked.' The Japanese had threatened them with arrest and torture. They had lived under an intolerable strain. They were unfeignedly delighted to see their Governor again. He had brought with him his faithful Sir Paw Tun and his clever assistant, Tin Tut. Now, as he looked with compassion on his old friends, with gratitude on Paw Tun and confidence on Tin Tut, he felt himself surrounded by a group of leading men on whose devoted loyalty he could rely and to whom he must show a loyalty no less devoted. But, he goes on, 'my main interest was,

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of course, my talk with Aung San and Than Tun, who were with me for over an hour.' They were quite frank. His speech had in no way modified their claims. The Military Administration should be abolished at once and a National Provisional Government set up.

Here was a nice dilemma. He had no power to negotiate; he had been sent only to announce H.M.G.'s programme and make it seem as attractive as possible. He could only beg Aung San and Than Tun to be reasonable and to believe the promises he had made. Their reply was that they did not doubt his sincerity. But the White Paper was open to many interpretations and could be applied in a variety of ways. That he had promised to apply it in a certain manner was no guarantee that H.M.G., on one pretext or another, would not modify their first generous impulses, as they could easily do and still remain within its terms. Let him hand over to them and his programme would go through—*his* programme, for had he not declared that it was practically the same as theirs?

But even if he could have handed over to them—which was of course utterly impossible in the face of his instructions—how could he leave all those who had supported him in the lurch? And why should he? The League claimed to represent a united Burma, but here was the pick of the former political leaders, delighted to see him back, offering their support. The League was evidently not a National Front, but only a party. How strong it was time would show. If it had had a certain unity yesterday, it might split tomorrow, as was common experience in Burmese politics. And yet? And yet? One could not be certain. 'I could not but wonder whether the older politicians had it in them to fight their more vigorous young opponents or whether the old leaders are finished, physically and mentally. . . . I think that we will have to anticipate a very uneasy year or so. We will be sitting on a volcano which will always be liable to erupt.' He had now come round to Mountbatten's view that the best hope was that somehow or other when the time came for him to take over from the Military Administration (and that would depend on when the war with Japan ended) Aung San and Than Tun could be induced to

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join an advisory Council on which also would have to be Paw Tun and other faithfuls, for he could not leave out those who had supported the British in the darkest days of the Japanese invasion.

So the problem was posed. He could do nothing to solve it for the moment. Amery sent him his congratulations on the way he had handled the meeting, but hinted that some Cabinet Ministers thought he had gone too far.

The happy partnership with Amery was now to end. Parliament was dissolved and the country returned a Labour Government. On 4 August his new chief, the Rt. Hon. Frederick William Pethick-Lawrence<sup>1</sup> sent a wire announcing the fact that he had been appointed Secretary of State for Burma. Events now moved quickly. On 8 August the first atom bomb was dropped. On 12 August Japan surrendered. With the end of the war in Asia, the end of military administration in Burma was in sight. Dorman-Smith consulted Mountbatten and urged that the hand-over be soon, as the Burmese were pressing for the end of military rule. After some argument the date was fixed for October, though Mountbatten felt that this was too early. As revealed at the end of the last chapter, his inclination was to remain in control of Burmese affairs until he had won Aung San's complete confidence and persuaded him that Burma's best interests demanded that the League, abating its demand for a republic, should see in Dominion status a haven not inconsistent with Burmese pride. He had not, however, recommended to the Cabinet that a change of policy in Burma was essential if she were to be retained within the Commonwealth; nor did he suggest that a change of Governor should be made. It may be that since June he had had no time or opportunity, in view of his many preoccupations with urgent affairs in the Dutch Islands and French Indo-China, with which as Supreme Commander he had to cope, or perhaps he felt that as the new Government had decided to re-appoint Dorman-Smith, it was not for him to question what was, after all, a long term policy decision. The fact, also, that the Burmese themselves were now clamouring for the immediate return of civil government, would have made it more difficult for him to put his case for the

<sup>1</sup>Created Baron Pethick-Lawrence the same year.



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continuation of military rule. However, he knew from his conversations with Dorman-Smith how liberal were his views and how fond he was of the Burmese and hoped that he would be disposed, and able to get Whitehall's authority, to put such an interpretation on the White Paper that Aung San and the League would come in. This was in his mind, he tells me, when he consented to the hand-over.

Meanwhile, Aung San's prominence had been increasing. Mountbatten, anxious that, before he handed over, the Burma National Army should be absorbed, as agreed between him and Aung San in June, had suggested that the Bogyok be made a Brigadier and appointed deputy Inspector General in the regular Burma army. It was thought that this might induce his soldiers to follow him there. To this Dorman-Smith agreed. Aung San's acceptance of the post had yet to be secured. The disbandment of the National Army had not been proceeding as fast as the agreement laid down. Mountbatten writes<sup>1</sup>: 'At the beginning of September I summoned the leaders of the A.F.P.F. League and the Patriotic Burma Forces (the new name for the Burmese Independence Army) to Kandy; where a series of meetings was held, at which they were called on to explain the causes of their delay in carrying out the terms of the agreement.' Aung San explained the delay as due to misunderstandings and made no difficulty about entering into a further agreement to expedite the re-enlistment in the regular forces of those of his soldiers who were willing. (It made no difference to him. He could afford to write them off. He may also have felt that to have some of his adherents in the regular forces would serve him well.) Mountbatten goes on: 'Thakin Than Tun volunteered the full support of the A.F.P.F. League and of the Patriotic Burmese Forces in collecting arms throughout Burma; and I considered that the meetings had constituted an important step in the resettlement of the country.' (A quantity of arms was, in fact, collected, but only a fraction of the arms which remained hidden.)

Reporting to Pethick-Lawrence, Dorman-Smith pointed out that the disbandment of Aung San's army and the calling in of

<sup>1</sup>Lord Mountbatten's Despatch, section C, para. 90.

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its arms was only a limited settlement. 'Mountbatten seems to be satisfied that suitable arrangements have been made to deal with the taking over of the Burma National Army, but these cannot deal with the underground army which it seems almost certain does exist together with an unknown but very formidable number of hidden weapons. U Ba Pe (a leading old politician) told me there must be some 200,000 rifles etc. cached away, together with adequate stocks of ammunition.'

Since Mountbatten was handing over, it was impossible for him to do more than disband and disarm the National Army. He describes it as a step towards settlement. The next step would be for his successor, who would have to solve the problem of the underground army and caches of weapons, a problem which he expected would solve itself if the new policy he had in mind was introduced. As for Aung San, since he had not yet been offered terms which he could accept, he was obliged to nullify as far as possible the effect of the agreement, which he had been obliged to make with Mountbatten. The future was unpredictable. The British Government was standing on the White Paper. There was no indication of a change of policy. Mountbatten may have hinted to him that such a change was possible. But until it came, it was obvious that he must retain his armed power.

On his return to Burma from Kandy, he addressed a letter to Mountbatten, a copy of which he sent to Dorman-Smith. The letter is a strange mixture of frankness and dissimulation, of affection and menace. It begins: 'My dear Lord Louis,' and first refers to the offer of the Deputy Inspector Generalship. He declines it on the ground that he is giving up a military career and going into politics. (The idea that he should make a career as a regular officer in the British forces was, of course, ridiculous in his eyes; his real army was going to be elsewhere.) To make his refusal sound plausible he said: 'I regret very much that I shall not be able to serve further in the Army. . . . Personally, a military profession is one which I would have preferred to choose of all others . . . and I should desire to come in, as you proposed to me, just for the sake of obliging one who has obliged us in several ways and who will for ever retain an affectionate corner

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in my heart in spite of all the vicissitudes that may or may not rise between Burma and Britain in the political sphere in the future.' But alas! his colleagues in the League had refused their assent and he had no option but to submit to their ruling. The curious, intense letter goes on: 'Well, Sir, I must now take leave of you before I go out from the Army to face the portentous perspective of a political career which, I hope, at all events, will not be as portentous in actual fact as it looks. Anyway, whatever may be the future that lies ahead between us, I hope to retain always the happy relations that bind you and us now, and I would request you to keep forever my present of the Japanese samurai dagger as a souvenir of our sincere appreciation and gratitude of what you have done for us in the war just ended in S.E.A.C.' He concludes: 'With best regards, yours sincerely, Aung San.'

Thus the yet obscure youth in his twenties addresses as equal the most powerful man then in Asia. The letter is a capital document of Burmese history and biography. So much is said and left unsaid, so much hidden, so much hinted at, foreshadowed. A penetrating light is thrown on Aung San's own character. To many who beheld him at Kandy, a very small man in a great coat, shabby among the brilliant staff officers of an international headquarters, he looked insignificant. Certainly there was nothing assertive or flamboyant about him. He had no resemblance whatever to the European political boss or *duce*. Quietly, unobtrusively, almost shrinkingly, he had set out to fulfil the task laid upon him by those who called him Bogyok.

He had cast his spell over Mountbatten. He had also cast his spell over Dorman-Smith, who wrote at this time to Pethick-Lawrence: 'We must, I think, accept it as a fact that Aung San is the most important figure in Burma today. Everyone appears to trust him and admire him. . . . His troops adore him and will do anything he says. It appears that he had made all arrangements for a revolt against the Japs, which would have taken place even if we had not come into Burma so quickly. He has no ambition. His honesty is contrasted with the blatant dishonesty of Ba Maw. If there was to be an election in Burma now and Aung San were to lead a party he would sweep the country.'

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This citation shows that, when he wrote it, Dorman-Smith's interpretation of what was certainly a puzzling situation, was not unlike Mountbatten's. They both thought that Aung San had the people behind him. But when Dorman-Smith, as returned Governor, was obliged to face up to all the implications that the recognition of Aung San as representative of majority opinion involved, which included the jettisoning of the Ministers who had supported the Government through thick and thin, the conversion of the Cabinet to a new policy, the abandonment of the plans he had made for rehabilitating ruined Burma, and the shutting of his eyes to a number of unsavoury facts, he could not bring himself to treat Aung San as more than one of several leaders who, in the general election envisaged by the White Paper, might be returned with a majority.

## CHAPTER XXIX

### *The Return of the Civil Government to Burma*

NO change of policy towards Burma followed Labour's accession to power. Dorman-Smith wrote at once to say that if the new Cabinet thought it better to have a Governor from their own party, he would be happy to resign. But Pethick-Lawrence asked him to stay on. 'You should certainly at this stage proceed on the assumption that H.M.G.'s policy is in line with that of the late Government's White Paper,' he wired on 21 September. And he sharply warns him to resist any attempt by the League to seize power before an election disclosed which party had popular support.

On the mid-October date fixed for the Military Administration to hand over, the Civil Government moved from Simla to Rangoon. The long exile was at an end. The Governor and his advisers were returning at last to give effect to the plans on which they had been labouring for three years. Though the prospect of getting actively to work was exciting, it was sobering to reflect on the difficulties ahead. One bleak fact was that Burma had been ruined. The Military Administration's Handing Over Report contains this sentence: 'We do not think it any exaggeration to say that no British possession has suffered so much damage.' Restoration would be a lengthy task with the best help the Burmese could give. But would they help? The same Report frankly admits that though the Military Administration had succeeded in disbanding most of the League's army, 'large stocks of arms remained undisclosed,' enough to arm a new and larger

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army. With so much reserve power the League was not likely to be accommodating. Success would perhaps turn on whether it co-operated, but there was nothing to show that in the interval since the speech on the *Cumberland* Aung San and Than Tun had abated their claims. Indeed, there was definite evidence to the contrary, for the League at a big public meeting had made an uncompromising statement. It was possible, of course, that the Moderates would prevail. But not very likely, as Dorman-Smith himself had reported to London when he wrote that their leaders were tired and old.

*The Rangoon Liberator*, a newspaper of moderate views, thus describes the Civil Government's arrival on 16 October. 'In ideal weather with the azure sky above and a nip in the refreshing breeze along the river front, expectant faces were focussed on the Motor Launch 391 which proudly ploughed through the muddy waters of the Rangoon River towards the Naval Jetty.' This was the tone. At half past ten Dorman-Smith stepped ashore accompanied by his wife and a daughter, by his former Ministers, Paw Tun and Htoon Aung Gyaw, by the Acting Chief Justice and by Wise and Pearce.<sup>1</sup> 'His Excellency, looking very cheerful and brimful of health,' inspected the Guard of Honour and shook hands with the notabilities who had come to welcome him. Aung San and Than Tun were not among them. 'Their Excellencies then left by car for the Cathedral to attend a Dedication Service conducted by the Lord Bishop of Rangoon, driving along the streets lined with expectant crowds waiting to see and greet Their Excellencies. At 11.45 Their Excellencies arrived at Government House.' Lady Dorman-Smith's account in her diary is more realistic: 'Climbed into a staff jeep and drove to the Cathedral—troops lining streets and quite a large crowd of locals. Sule Pagoda Road is a shambles. A very nice service of dedication. Got back in the jeep which wouldn't budge, so had to transfer into a big car. Arrived at Government House about 12. All just the same outside. The Burmese A.D.C. had got a reasonable amount of furni-

<sup>1</sup>Mr C. F. B. Pearce on being succeeded as head of C.A.S.(B), by Major General Rance in June had reverted to his civil rank in his own service, the I.C.S.

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ture, including some of the original sitting-room chairs and covers. The grounds are jungle.'

Next day Dorman-Smith was given a civic reception at the City Hall. First he read the King's message. It was warm and sympathetic, referred to the people's sufferings and rejoiced at their liberation from the Japanese. Complete self government within the Commonwealth was promised as soon as it could be arranged after an orderly and free election. The Governor's early concern would be to appoint an Executive Council to assist him.

There followed Dorman-Smith's own speech. He could not do more than repeat what he had said in June on the *Cumberland*, for he was bound by the White Paper, but he sought to clothe his assurances in fresh words and express them in a voice if possible more earnest. He told his hearers that the war had greatly changed the British. 'Our experiences have taught us a new tolerance . . . a new understanding of what freedom means. . . . I have not come back to Burma with just the same old ideas . . . but with a definite programme. . . . Burma will—no longer "may"—take her place among the fully self-governing nations.' And he repeated: 'Burma's battle for freedom is over.' But the first step had to be an election. How else could the wishes of the people be ascertained? 'Let us get on with this election job as quickly as we can.' Though there could be no parliament and ministers till after an election, he would be unable to exercise the emergency powers given him by His Majesty's Government without the help of an advisory Council. Such a Council would, admittedly, be answerable to him and not to the people, but he begged his hearers to believe that this was no more than a temporary expedient. Its members, if not Ministers, would be in executive charge of all the departments which Ministers controlled before the war and he would also consult them on matters formerly not a ministerial responsibility. They would be asked to carry out the programme of reconstruction on which he had been working and which had received the sanction of His Majesty's Government. Members of Council could, of course, protest and resign, if they did not like the policy.

The speech created a favourable impression among the mod-

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erates. *The Rangoon Liberator* in a leading article said that it inaugurated a new era. 'We do not hesitate to call it perhaps the most important public statement ever made by a Governor of Burma. It was certainly the frankest, most sympathetic and the most human.' The paper urged the Burmese to 'accept the proffered hand of friendship and help'.

The League, however, could not take this view. What in plain language was the situation? The Governor had been given the autocratic powers of Section 139 for three years. He had a programme, the details of which had not been published. Parts of it might be good, parts of it might be bad. What about, for instance, the re-establishment of the British firms in their former position? It was impossible to accept the policy in advance. The proposed Council would have no legal power whatever to veto even the smallest item of the programme. Its task would be only to co-operate in carrying it out. Such a Council would have no resemblance to a national provisional government. It could advise, no doubt, but would, in fact, be no more than an autocratic Governor's agent. To prevent the people from being deluded by the kind words they had heard into thinking that the Governor, as he had declared in his June speech, had a policy identical with the League's, it would be necessary to expose his policy. This would be done openly in the press. They would expose it also by a manoeuvre, the classic manoeuvre of an offer to collaborate, but on terms which were bound to be rejected. That would not only put the Governor in the wrong but throw suspicion on all his assurances. It would also oblige him to pack the Council with the opponents of the League, for he would not be able to find anyone else. He would then be disclosed in his true colours as the opponent of the national front. Paw Tun would stand out as his right hand man, Paw Tun, the old enemy of the Thakin founders of the League, many of whom he had incarcerated during his premiership.

As Dorman-Smith had declared in his speech, he set to work immediately to form the Council. He had conversations with, amongst others, the representatives of the League. His intention was, he said, to have fifteen members, which number he reduced



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on reflection to eleven. As he was not now denying that the old parties were incorporated in the League, he would be ready to consider the League's nominees for most of the places. Of the eleven places, however, he intended to fill four himself; Paw Tun would get the Home Portfolio, Htoon Aung Gyaw Finance, while Defence and the Frontier areas would go to two British officials.

The League, after professing its willingness to submit names for the Council, now came forward with its conditions. It demanded in the first place all the seven remaining seats; secondly that all its nominees be accepted or none; that the League should determine which portfolios they were to hold and that one of them must be the Home; finally, that all their seven members would have to report the proceedings of the Council to the Supreme Council of the League, which would instruct them in the course they should take. These conditions, if accepted, would have placed the Council under the League. The Governor despite his statutory powers under Section 139, could have got nothing done without the League's permission. The League would have become, what it claimed to be, the Provisional Government of Burma.

Dorman-Smith could not accept these demands, as the League knew he could not. He had, of course, no option. They were totally at variance with the White Paper, whose policy he had been ordered to follow. They could not be squared with the legal position unless Section 139 were treated as a fiction. They would have amounted to an immediate grant of independence. He reported at once to the Secretary of State who wired that the demands must certainly be refused.<sup>1</sup> So, as the League intended, the Council had to be filled up with persons hostile to it. There was now no difficulty in denouncing Dorman-Smith as a reactionary, a Fascist. Within a few days of landing, despite his earnest efforts at conciliation, he was written down as an uncompromising autocrat. The question was whether his Council, composed of old politicians whose following might or might not be large, could resist the League. That they were no match for it was to become gradually indisputable.

<sup>1</sup>Dorman-Smith would have accepted the demand for seven seats, but H.M.G. was opposed even to that concession.

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Dorman-Smith's position was unenviable, but as he reflected on what had passed between Aung San and himself it did not seem that events could have had a different issue. After meeting him in June on the *Cumberland*, he had had further conversations with him in September at Kandy, for both of them had been visiting Mountbatten at that time. He had found him not unattractive as a personality, but had been unable to win him over by assurances or argument, though they had remained on good terms. It was in this spirit that they had now met to discuss the nominations to the Council. He remembered how Aung San had said flatly that Paw Tun was unfitted to hold the Home portfolio, as he had been out of touch with Burmese affairs for over three years. He did not know what was going on. 'For instance, he does not know where the dumps of arms are hidden.' Aung San had said this in a reasonable, even pleasant, tone, without a hint of the menace that lay beneath the words. What a relief it would have been if they could have come to an arrangement! All would have been plain sailing, reconstruction have gone ahead with a will. As it was, what was likely to happen? Supposing Aung San, biding his time, were to resort to force? The quantities of hidden arms, the League's organisation that reached every village, would spell a national uprising. What would the Generals say to that? The Generals would call him a damned fool for precipitating it. He recalled how in conversations which he had had with them and Mountbatten at Kandy in September, they had not disguised their opinions. Aung San must be so handled that he would have no inclination to upset the country. The idea of having to find troops to fight him was abhorrent. At the end of a desperate war waged for freedom against tyranny to have to start suppressing, colonial style, a national movement, would be a nightmare. Where the troops, where the money, where the support for such a ham-handed policy? Aung San must be humoured into reasonableness. They had done their bit pretty well. They had disbanded his army, collected its arms. True, there were more men, more arms, underground. But, good God! there were always men and arms underground if one mishandled a political situation. Aung San must be won over. And he remembered how they had advocated

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coming to terms with the League at once, as the only way of avoiding trouble. 'All the Generals,' he had written to Pethick-Lawrence, 'united in pressing me to re-open the whole question of our Burma policy with you. They spoke of Burma's distrust of the White Paper and of our intentions in no unmeasured terms.' But there had been nothing he could do except remind them that the White Paper was the result of prolonged Cabinet deliberations, in which Labour members had taken full part. If Mountbatten wanted to represent the matter let him do so; with the great influence he could command, so much greater than a Governor's, perhaps he would succeed. But he had said nothing to show that he intended to try his hand. That the Generals favoured a change of policy was no doubt known to Aung San, since he had been in close touch with them at Kandy. He might well have guessed also that they would be very averse in any circumstances to marching against him. If so, he had the ball at his feet. All he had to do was to give warning that he could no longer hold his followers back. No need for him to threaten. He could remain his open, friendly self. A mere hint would suffice. A national rising could be kept simmering in the offing. That line would sooner or later give him the game.

These reflections were very discouraging for a man who, a few days back, had arrived hoping there was a reasonable chance of carrying out his instructions. It was not that he was thinking of his own future, though a public servant, who fails to carry out impossible orders, is always blamed and disregarded. No, it was not that. After all, he had never planned to make a great name, though he had aspired to be the humble instrument whereby Burma, restored to prosperity, might reach her goal of self-government. That was the point. Would she reach it through Aung San? What sort of man was this Bogyok? One could like him. If he returned the liking, that would be something. His confidence, could one have it, would be valuable, even though to win him remained impossible. But this little soldier, so intense, so retiring, what brand of freedom had he in mind for Burma? It was true that the League had published a sketch of a democratic constitution, a sort of socialism as far as one could judge.

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But was that, in fact, the constitution which it would establish? One was bound to say that it seemed improbable. Was not the League a Fascist tyranny? Did not its leaders maintain themselves in power by threats, by violence? It was suspected that they raised funds by armed robbery and maintained their authority by terrorising the villagers. Surely it would be unthinkable to hand over Burma to such an organisation? Well, there was no thought of that. H.M.G.'s instructions were explicit. He had appointed a Council of moderates ready to work with him. They were not as young a body as he would have liked. But at least they had the experience of age and its patience. And perhaps they could be strengthened. If he could get U Saw back, for instance. Surely he should be released now? U Saw would be the man to test Aung San's claims. But for the present the only course was to get started on the programme. When the public appreciated better what a good one it was and heard that the Treasury had advanced money to finance it, many of them would rally to his support. The League's following would diminish. A national rising would seem quite unnecessary to all sensible people. The League itself might then come over. He would let it be known that Aung San and Than Tun would always be welcome on the Council.

## CHAPTER XXX

### *The Contest with Aung San*

**D**uring the next seven months from November 1945 to the end of May 1946, when he left Burma, Dorman-Smith struggled to resolve the problem of how to win over the League while carrying out his instructions under the White Paper, or, in the alternative of how to ignore the League without risking a rebellion, which it might not be easy to put down and which would in any case completely disrupt his programme by making impossible the revival of trade, the holding of an election and the launching of the new constitution. The present chapter traces the course of events during these seven months. It should be repeated that what the British Government was facing was not a political party but the Resistance, the same Resistance which had been founded before the Japanese invasion, which had become fully organised during the Japanese occupation and whose sole aim now was to establish a Republic. To achieve its object, the League would have to remain united. The unity it required was the unity of the mass of the Burmese people behind it. The defection of leaders of the former political parties would be undesirable, but would not be fatal. As the old party organisations hardly existed, a leader who left the League, though certainly some followers would go with him, would carry into opposition far less than the total of those who had formerly voted for his party. So long, therefore, as the League's village organisation held, its stocks of arms were intact, and its guerrillas ready to use them, such desertions would not affect the essentials of its strength. But they would certainly be confusing for outsiders to interpret. It might become, for instance, very difficult for the Governor to assess them at their

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proper value, for the deserters on joining him would be bound to magnify their own importance and the number of their adherents.

Let us now try to follow the up and down of events and opinions as revealed in Dorman-Smith's papers. The Secretary of State, feeling that the Burma administration had entered on a delicate phase, thought it necessary to restrict the normal latitude allowed to a Governor and insist that, before decisions of any importance were taken, reference to Whitehall should be made. This involved Dorman-Smith in sending frequent reports which, in a situation so complicated and with so many facets and on the surface so continually changing, were bound to contain apparent contradictions or mistaken appreciations, since the true explanation of what was happening at any particular moment could not be understood until the whole became manifest. The Labour Government was rather more cautious than had been the Coalition. The correspondence suggests that in Whitehall's view Dorman-Smith had perhaps promised too much in his speech at the City Hall, that he was a little too anxious to appease the League and might well have been a bit stiffer. He is warned, for instance, not to refer in public for the present to Dominion Status. As for the possibility of secession from the Commonwealth (if true, as Reuter reported, that he used the words) the Cabinet would be obliged if he refrained from using them again. He was advised to keep well within the White Paper and to avoid at all costs the impression that the British were buying off their enemies at the expense of their friends.

The White Paper laid down that the appointment of a Council was to be followed by the appointment of a Legislature. Though Section 139 empowered the Governor to promulgate laws, such enactments would come better through a legislative body. In November, when engaged on selecting nominees to the number of about forty, Dorman-Smith offered seats to Aung San and Than Tun. 'This will not commit you to supporting me,' he said. 'You can act as do the leaders of the Opposition at Westminster.' To which Aung San replied disconcertingly that he did not recognise opposition to the League and so could not head a Council party opposing what did not exist. On that very day the

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League had organised a mass meeting at the national shrine, the Shwedagon Pagoda. Aung San, always frank to a fault, showed him the agenda. Its first item declared that the Governor was unworthy to represent a democratic country like Britain. 'It will be passed by acclamation,' he explained. Such directness was disarming and Dorman-Smith could only exhort him not to excite the people to a point where a breach of the peace might ensue. 'Don't worry,' he replied. 'We have our methods of handling crowds.' In fact, the crowds at this meeting and at all his mass meetings were quiet and earnest. Dorman-Smith records how once, when out walking, he and his wife ran into one coming away from the pagoda. Though its members had been listening for hours to denunciations of the Government, they were no less calm than if returning home from work. So orderly did they seem, that he did not hesitate to mingle with them. They may not have guessed who he was, but evidently had not been incited against the British in general. In a letter of 18 November describing these mass demonstrations, he speculates, as he must frequently have done, on the power of the League. 'Just how far its real influence extends, it is difficult to say.' Yet Aung San and his colleagues do seem 'to have the whole political field to themselves at the moment.' No other party was making counter demonstrations. No member of the Council could have staged one. He also wonders what is Aung San's real character. Perhaps he has overrated him in previous letters home. Was he quite balanced? Hard to say. Hard to be clear, too, about Than Tun. 'I cannot size him up.'

It was at this time, in the hope of getting a notion of what the ordinary man thought, that Dorman-Smith used to wander about the town of an evening, accompanied only by an A.D.C. They would stop for a cup of tea at wayside stalls, or talk to labourers at the docks. Everyone seemed friendly and pleasant, though very poor and miserably housed. Rangoon was like a shanty town. It was daunting to think of the preliminary work to be done before the main programme could be got under way. Lack of supplies from Europe was most frustrating. The railways had no rolling stock, but where to buy it? There were only thirty

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locomotives in the whole country. Road transport was in a shocking condition as were the roads. It cost £200 to send a lorry of goods to Mandalay. Crime was very bad. The police force had become degraded. Prices were soaring, wages were too low. How could he solve such multifarious problems in the face of the League's opposition? 'So please do not expect too much from us,' he begged Pethick-Lawrence.

The League, though unable to prevent the establishment of a Council and now of a Legislature, had the power to paralyse their activities. This rather than a national rising became its policy. The threat that the nation might rise was a strong card and if the worst came to the worst it could be played. But the objection to a rebellion was that it would oblige the British against their inclinations to resort in return to force. They would not see themselves attacked without putting up a resistance. Threat of rebellion by all means, but not rebellion itself, was the plan. The British could be ejected without firing a shot if their administration was brought to a standstill. This would involve obstructing and slowing down the measures framed to restore the country. The people would suffer, their recovery be delayed, for the programme admittedly had its good points. But liberty could not be purchased for nothing.

The League now set about strengthening its organisation. Aung San founded the People's Volunteer Organisation. The P.V.O. was manned by the soldiers of the Burma National Army who had not re-enlisted in the regular Burma Army, and its numbers were largely increased by fresh recruits. In that way the National Army was reborn and could be expanded as ample arms were available. Its existence provided the desired threat, though it was not intended to use it for a rebellion, unless the other policy failed. It would be employed for the present to foment obstruction and organise strikes. To make sure that its existence, and so the military threat that it represented, should be known at once to the Government, detachments of it were publicly drilled. When Aung San was informed that he must not drill with arms what was evidently a private army, he declared, what no one in the Government believed and what he did not want to be believed, that it



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was not an army but only an ex-service organisation, a sort of Home Guard, each man eager to do his bit for the country. If the order was for them to drill without arms, he would be happy to see it was obeyed. And to thicken the mystery of what exactly was going on, the League ordered its agencies in places to co-operate in the reconstruction programme. This was taken to indicate that the League was divided, evidently a view the League thought was advantageous to foster. Meanwhile, as his name passed from lip to lip, the belief gathered force that Aung San was the saviour, whose coming had long been foretold by the astrologers. Writing to Whitehall on 16 December, Dorman-Smith declared: 'The whole strength of the League appears to depend on the personality of Aung San.' He wonders whether, if he were to lose his magnetic power over the audiences he addressed, the League would collapse. Yet, he could only lose his power if the people ceased to believe in him. Sometimes one thought there were signs that the belief was waning. The leaders of some of the political parties, which had enrolled themselves under the general banner of the Resistance, began to leave the League. Might not this, attributable no doubt to personal ambitions, rivalry or jealousy, shake the masses' faith in Aung San? Yet their admiration seemed to grow, the legend to grow. Of all his attributes, it was his youth that astonished most. He had just passed his thirtieth birthday. It was reported at this time that the League had the idea of sending him with a deputation to London. Dorman-Smith, thinking it might have a mellowing effect on him, invited Whitehall's favourable attention. A reply came that the Cabinet would not receive any such deputation. The Burmese seem to have thought that Mountbatten would put in a word for them in London. The affection which Aung San had for him, as the letter quoted has disclosed, was now shared by the whole nation, which held him, Dorman-Smith reported, to be one of the very few foreigners who understood them. This curious strand in the involved drama did not decrease Dorman-Smith's perplexities. There were, in addition, signs that the Labour Government's attitude to the League had its critics in the House itself; Mr Thomas Driberg was mentioned as one of them. But that such

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criticisms were likely to influence H.M.G.'s policy there was no indication, for letters and wires continued to stress the importance of keeping the League at arm's length.

In these uncertainties 1945 passed into 1946. Dorman-Smith tried to get his programme started. The difficulties were heart-breaking. Ploughing for the rice crop, the staple industry, would not begin for another six months. To induce the peasants to plant the hundreds of thousands of acres which had gone out of cultivation under the Japanese, arrangements were made to give a subsidy. But money was not enough; what the peasantry wanted were consumer goods and plough cattle, both in very short supply. Banditry was so rife, that in many places it was unsafe to work the fields; transport so lacking that supplies could not be moved. Even so, progress was made. The British firms, which had handled the timber trade, the rice mills, the oil wells and the mines, were enlisted under control, as Burmese public feeling was strong against their being left free to re-establish themselves under the shadow of direct rule in their former position. They agreed to assist the Government by working as its agents on definite reconstruction projects. Attempts were also made to encourage the formation of Burmese firms alongside them. Nevertheless, the return of the British firms was the cause of acrimonious comment in the frequent mass meetings arranged by the League. Their being represented as agents in the reconstruction was declared a camouflage to hide their real intentions. By the time the Governor's direct rule was terminated, they would be again masters of the export trade. Thus, the Government, in its striving to restore the country's prosperity, was obliged to use instruments which gave a handle to charges of double dealing: the country was not being restored, but the profits of the City of London. Such denunciations by the League were expected, but hopes had been entertained that the Moderates and their press would come out as the Government's champions. These anticipations were not realised. The press was severely critical and even the Council was very suspicious. Supposed to help by advising quickly on ways and means, it delayed projects, raised doubts and lost precious time. The fact was that the League's demands were not opposed as

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such by the members of the Council. The difference between them and the League lay not in principles but in rivalry for power. To win power, the Councillors had to reorganise their parties, but no party could get supporters if its policy were co-operation with the Government, nor could hope to win an election if it did not advocate immediate independence. In this sense it remained true that all parties were still under the League, since the League's demands were a common platform. There were not nor could be any moderate politicians. Those who had seemed so by entering the Council were in reality but the personal rivals of those who controlled the League. Moderates, of course, existed among the general population, many of them people of education and character, but it was so unfashionable to trust the British and even to want their help and gifts, that for anyone publicly to urge moderation would have been to court grave unpopularity. The most that the Councillors were prepared to do was to wait for the election. But if they, or a section of them, could win it, they would adopt the League's policy in its entirety and demand immediate independence. Paw Tun would have liked to arrest Aung San and the Leaguers, as he had done their predecessors, the Thakins, when Premier. He could not arrest them now, but could advise the Governor to do so. Perhaps, supported by His Majesty's Government, Dorman-Smith might be induced to clear the way to power for him and his party. But Aung San could not be arrested unless it were established that he was conspiring to overthrow the British régime by force. Though the Government was apprehensive that he might attempt this, there was little to show that he was about to do so. In January 1946 widespread banditries occurred in the Pegu district. These were represented as the beginning of a general rebellion. The arrest of Aung San was considered, but evidence was not forthcoming to connect the Pegu disturbances with the League. The chiefs of police seem to have been of opinion that a national rising would be like gang robbery on a big scale, as was the 1931 rebellion. But Aung San was a very different man from the peasant fanatic Saya San who had led that rebellion; and the Burmese of 1946 with their experience of modern war and their possession of modern weapons

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would not have broken out in such an old-fashioned, futile way. The police chiefs were only alarming themselves and the Government by mistaking lawlessness for conspiracy.

At about this time or a little later the police opened fire on a procession at a place called Tantabin in the Delta. Three peasants were killed. The League decided on a public funeral and it was announced that Aung San would make the oration. As it was certain that he would use the occasion to stiffen the people's opposition to the Government by increasing the indignation which was already felt at the shooting, Dorman-Smith asked him, before he left for the funeral, to come to see him. Aung San accepted the invitation. He was in the habit of coming to Government House from time to time, since between him and Dorman-Smith a queer sort of friendship existed. Moreover, it was both his nature and his policy to mingle frankness with dissimulation. He was not a punctual man and when he arrived, as usual about half an hour late, Dorman-Smith asked him point blank whether he intended to start a rebellion at Tantabin. This no doubt was the question which he expected and, as the League's constant policy was to let it be known that a rebellion might break out at any time, he did not deny the allegation, though he had enough *finesse* not to admit it, so as to leave the answer in agitating doubt. Dorman-Smith begged him to consider well what he was doing. He and his P.V.O. irregulars could not beat the British army in the field. Guerrilla warfare would seal the ruin of the country. He would be condemning many of his followers to death. 'And all for what? You want Burma to be free. So do we. All that we are arguing about is how and when that freedom should come. Are you really going to tell me that you can even contemplate plunging Burma into another war, when in fact you and I are fighting for the same things, though in a different way?'<sup>1</sup>

Aung San had already heard the same argument on the *Cumberland* and had refused to accept its validity. He considered that freedom would come faster through him, also more surely and completely. He had the power to bring it; unless he gave the power no one else could bring it. But what was the good of a

<sup>1</sup>Quoted from the Dorman-Smith papers.

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dispute? It was a chance, however, to increase the mystification. 'All right,' he said. 'I'll be moderate and stay on at the funeral until the crowd has dispersed.'

He made his speech, not a moderate one, but of course no rebellion followed. Not long afterwards he was again having a chat at Government House. Dorman-Smith thanked him for his co-operation. He smiled, and remarked cryptically: 'I do not want war but beyond that I learnt a lesson at Tantabin. We could not have made any trouble as our petrol supplies broke down and my supporters from over the river could not cross over to us.'

What did these veiled words mean? That next time he would make more careful arrangements about petrol or that he had been persuaded to hold his hand? It was impossible to say. As always there was the half threat. No denying he had the arms, had the men, the authority. As Governor responsible for internal security, one was obliged to assume the danger was real. To dismiss it as a manoeuvre was impossible. The police were ordered to redouble their vigilance. But rebellion came no nearer; nor yet did it recede. Nothing was done which would have warranted the arrest of Aung San. But if an arrest should become justifiable, would it precipitate rather than prevent a rebellion? Would it make things worse or better? And would Whitehall sanction it, for so important a matter would have to be referred? These were questions on which there was difference of opinion. Meanwhile Aung San grew stronger. To be able to claim that the Government dared not arrest him increased the admiration in which he was held. But more power did not make him less diffident. He was subject at times to fits of melancholy. Could he mount higher without falling? Could he, hardly more than a youth, steer his country to freedom? As he had written to Mountbatten, it was something portentous that he had set out to do. He had the people's love, yet was surrounded by enemies, the crowd of old politicians, mortally jealous of his place, of the leadership which each of them had aspired to and failed to win. Could he hope to come through?

One evening at this time, when in such a faltering mood, he came to see Dorman-Smith. The scene that followed was very curious. If Aung San was unlike any Burman seen heretofore,

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Dorman-Smith had also no prototype among British Governors. He found it very hard to play the official, for he was so driven by his heart that he always strove to make a friend, whoever it might be, high or low, and whether antagonist or not. Aung San was susceptible to this warmth and now in his moment of despondency came to unburden himself. He began to speak of his loneliness. He had always been lonely, he said. He had wanted friends, but found it very hard to make them. 'How can you say you have no friends,' said Dorman-Smith, 'when you are the people's idol?' 'I did not seek to be that,' said Aung San, 'but only to free my country. How lonely a task it would be, I never guessed.' And saying this he wept. Dorman-Smith sought to comfort him, but he was not comforted. 'How long do national heroes last?' he said bitterly. 'Not long in this country; they have too many enemies. Three years is the most they can hope to survive. I do not give myself more than another eighteen months of life.'

So he spoke of his approaching death. It was both a premonition and because the astrologers had warned him. He knew that his time was short; and could not help telling Dorman-Smith. His weeping was not because he was afraid or could not accept his fate, but because he was moved by finding someone in whom he could confide.

The White Paper declared, as we have seen, that the territories of the hill peoples would not be included in the future free state of Burma until the inhabitants so wished. In January 1946 Dorman-Smith went to Myitkyina to give this message personally to the Kachins. It was not without emotion that he found himself again in the town which he had left in June 1942 in circumstances of such stress. There was hardly a house standing and he saw many graves. The Kachins, however, were in high spirits. They had arranged a feast and a dance. In his speech Dorman-Smith gave them the message and said that England would never forget the courageous way they had fought the Japanese in their hills and would make it a point of honour to provide funds for their advancement in the modern world, and particularly meet their request for hospitals and schools. There was great rejoicing and

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a great deal of drinking. Dorman-Smith noticed that the leading Kachin Chief was wearing the dinner jacket, a handsome Savile Row affair, which three and a half years before he had had to abandon at Myitkyina. The jacket sat well on the gallant Chief, as a Savile Row jacket will always do, even when, as in this case, worn without trousers. The Kachins had evidently a distance to catch up, but in asking for schools they had shown they were aware of it, and, in fact, caught up so fast that a year later they were not afraid to leave the Commonwealth with the Burmese.

On 19 January, soon after Dorman-Smith's return to Rangoon from the north, Mountbatten came to stay. He was *en route* to Singapore, now headquarters of the South East Asia Command, after a visit to Wavell, the Viceroy. Wavell and Auchinleck, the C.-in-C., had asked him, he said, to give a message: it would be impossible to employ Indian troops in the event of a rebellion in Burma, because public opinion in India would be strongly opposed to their being used to suppress a national uprising. On Dorman-Smith enquiring what troops would be available, Mountbatten replied that there were few British or Dominion regiments in S.E.A.C. It was not clear what troops could be sent. In the circumstances every effort should be made to avoid a rebellion.

Since it was the White Paper policy which was causing the tension, its abandonment would be the surest way of relaxing it. The Cabinet, however, had shown no sign of reconsidering its policy, yet would, as was now evident, be unable to use the only troops available to enforce it, if challenged by a rising. Dorman-Smith was left to continue the policy without the means to do so in the event of it being resisted by force. In short, the White Paper had become divorced from realities. The Cabinet would have to come to an agreement with Aung San, unless it proposed to send a British expeditionary force, hardly likely with an empty treasury, a war-weary country and an adverse opinion in America. Unfortunately, however, instead of informing Dorman-Smith that because of the way the situation had developed it had become necessary to receive a deputation from the League to discuss a settlement, the Cabinet postponed a decision and reiterated that an election was an essential preliminary to negotiations. 'Let the

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best man win,' Pethick-Lawrence wrote on 1 March. Negotiations could then be opened with whomever he might be.

It could be claimed that Dorman-Smith should at this time have reported back to London and asked for a fresh directive in the light of Mountbatten's message. There seemed, however, no point in asking for what he knew he would not get. All the circumstances obliged him to continue in the course which had been set for him. He had to give Paw Tun and the other public men, whom he had appointed to the Council, a chance to show whether they could win the election. Moreover, he himself still clung to the hope that moderate opinion might prevail in the end. All the advice he received was to that effect. In January Paw Tun had reported that he believed he could form an all-Burma front. U Saw, who had now been released and by February was back in Burma, spoke of bringing his party into line with Paw Tun's. Aung San's power was declining, they said; he had had good cards but played them badly. He could point to no definite achievements since the return of the Government. Let them carry on as they were doing. By the time the election came Aung San's followers would be a minority.

What the Council advised agreed with the reports received from the Civil Service. Wise, Pearce and the rest had not changed their views. Speaking from their long experience in Burma, they assured him that the arrest of Aung San would clear the air. He had lost so much ground that few would care. It would prevent rather than precipitate a rebellion. It was unnecessary to wait till he further incriminated himself. The speeches he had already made at mass meetings brought him within the scope of the law of sedition. If a trial was undesirable he could be quietly detained as a political prisoner. Once inside, he would be forgotten in a month.

Dorman-Smith, though his views were much less fixed and he had a more lively sense of the balance of the situation, besides a natural liberality and a genuine sympathy for Burmese aspirations, could not but be influenced by his advisers, many of them old and tried friends. How was he to go to the Secretary of State and raise the question of a fresh approach, when he would have



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to admit that in doing so he was acting against the advice both of his senior officials and the members of his Council? Moreover, the Cabinet was as committed as he was to trying out the existing policy. The assumption that an election could be held was supported by a quantity of testimony. There was not the smallest likelihood that such an essay on his part, very tentative as it would have to be, would lead to his receiving a fresh directive. The best course, the only democratic course, was to hasten the election. The electoral rolls would be ready by next year. Surely he could hold out till then, if, as he was assured, Aung San's authority was waning? Once a party was returned, a fresh start could be made. If the electorate refused power to the old politicians, then, of course, they would have to go. The British could not be blamed for that and so would escape the odium of having forsaken their friends.

Events now took an unexpected turn. The Legislative Council, consisting of thirty-five non-official Burmans nominated by the Governor, had its first session on 28 February. In his opening address Dorman-Smith asked the members to give their advice freely and help him to carry on till the election. During the debates which followed, there was much violent criticism of the League, as all the members were its opponents. The culminating point was reached when U Tun Oke, an ex-Thakin, one of the original Thirty who had marched in with the Japanese, the same man whom they had first tried as Ahnashin, got up and accused Aung San of murder. He said that during the invasion Aung San and he, with troops of the Burmese Independence Army who were following behind the Japanese divisions advancing on the Sittang, arrived at a village near Thaton, the headman of which was an Indian. An accusation was made against the headman that he was in communication with the British and was organising the villagers to rise against the Japanese. He was arraigned before a court-martial presided over by Aung San, and condemned to death. Aung San, taking it upon himself personally to carry out the sentence, had struck him with his sword, but failing to despatch him ordered a soldier to give the *coup de grâce*. As this was murder, Aung San should be arrested. Tun Oke added that, as an eye-

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witness throughout of what took place, he was ready to give evidence at the trial.

This startling allegation was reported both in the Rangoon and London papers. It was not, however, the first that the Government had heard of the matter. Some two months previously a confidential report from police sources had given the information or some part of it. The report had been considered by the heads of the police, but an investigation into its truth was not ordered. After Tun Oke's public statement, however, some action had to be taken. The police were directed to start an investigation and Dorman-Smith wired to the Secretary of State for sanction, if need be, to arrest Aung San. The Secretary of State replied that he was against immediate arrest. The investigation was not complete. Tun Oke was a man of doubtful reputation, said to have been implicated himself in deeds of violence during the invasion. Before any action was taken the Government should be quite certain of its ground. A mistake would lay it open to a charge of political spite.

To consider what steps to take, a meeting was convened at Government House, Rangoon, on 27 March. As Dorman-Smith was absent in Maymyo, Sir John Wise presided. General Briggs,<sup>1</sup> the C.-in-C. Burma Command, and his staff were present, as were the senior officials of the administration and the police. After Wise had explained the circumstances and revealed (what was till then generally unknown) that the Government had had an earlier report on the killing, he announced that a strongly worded signal had been received from the Supreme Commander that day, stating that he disliked the proposal to arrest Aung San before a full investigation had been made and saying that he had signalled Whitehall to that effect. Wise then invited the opinions of those present on the advisability or otherwise of the arrest. His Excellency would be returning the next day and would want to know the views of the Services. First of all what had the heads of the police to say?

Mr Chettle, the Inspector-General, answered that he thought

<sup>1</sup>Now Lt.-General Sir Harold Rawdon Briggs, K.C.I.E., K.B.E., C.B., D.S.O.

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an arrest would result in a rebellion. Mr Orr, the head of the Criminal Investigation Department, Burma's Scotland Yard, agreed that disturbances of the kind would certainly follow. Wise suggested that judging from the tone of public speeches, which had recently grown more threatening, there would be a rebellion anyhow. Moreover, it was quite possible that someone might lay a formal complaint of murder, which if accompanied by *prima facie* evidence would legally oblige the police to arrest. (He was, perhaps, thinking of the deceased headman's widow, who was said to be contemplating such a step.) The Inspector-General of Police, however, remained opposed to an arrest and reminded the meeting that the granting of a free pardon to all those who had committed offences during the war was under discussion. The investigation, moreover, was going on. Let them wait at least till it was completed.

General Briggs and his staff then gave their opinion. They said that the arrest of Aung San was likely to result in a mutiny in the Burma Army. The three or four thousand of Aung San's soldiers who had enlisted in it after the disbandment of the Burma Defence Army would revolt. Though there had been some defections from the League, Aung San remained very influential, particularly in the villages, whose young men would probably rise to avenge him. Though the politicians in the Council would welcome the arrest of their chief rival, they might be clever enough to use it to belabour the Government, a manoeuvre which they could hope, by giving them the support of the League, would transform them from collaborators into national leaders. Indeed, Tun Oke might well have made his statement solely with that political object, and not from any love of justice or law, for judging from a book he had published in 1943 he was more violently opposed to the British than was Aung San, and had committed darker deeds. As things now stood, went on General Briggs, Aung San was too sensible to start a rebellion. But his restraining influence would disappear with his arrest. For that reason alone it would be a mistake to arrest him. In conclusion, the General reminded his hearers that the Viceroy and the C.-in-C. India were emphatic that Indian troops should not be used to

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suppress a rebellion. That being so, it was essential to avoid it. He ventured to add that the Labour Government would be well advised to review the White Paper and fix a date for handing the country over to the Burmese. Pearce, late head of the Civil Affairs Administration, expressed disagreement with these arguments, and Wise, who still thought there would be a rebellion whether Aung San were arrested or not, was also unimpressed by the General's contentions and wound up the meeting.

Dorman-Smith returned to Rangoon next day and the minutes with their conflicting views were put before him. A strong believer in personal contacts, he asked Aung San to come to see him. He tells me that Aung San calmly accepted full responsibility for what had happened. The headman had been tried by a court-martial and executed under its sentence.

Dorman-Smith records that he could not but admire him for his moral courage. But there it was—the law did not recognise his explanation as valid, as the court-martial had no legal standing. He was quite unprotected against a prosecution. Anyone in the country could go to the police or petition a magistrate. The law once set in motion, nothing could stop it. In fact, this had already happened, for the police were investigating the case. If they found there was *prima facie* evidence, as seemed likely since the main facts were not denied, they were obliged by law to arrest Aung San and send him for trial. If they neglected to do so, the law enjoined that those responsible for the neglect should themselves be prosecuted. The Government itself had not the power to intervene, short of an act of indemnity. The matter was out of his hands. H.M.G. had reserved to itself the right to decide whether the case should be pursued or not. He could do no more than forward the papers.

A fortnight later, when on a visit to Singapore, he received a wire from Whitehall directing him to arrest Aung San. He flew back to Rangoon at once and ordered the Inspector General to comply. The warrant was made out and a man had started off to get it served, when a second wire came in which cancelled the first; no action was to be taken until further orders. A messenger was quickly sent and the warrant was recalled just in time.

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It seems that on second thoughts the Ministers of the Crown decided not to risk a rebellion, the suppression of which (if troops and money could be found to effect it) would be so widely unpopular as to embarrass them abroad and weaken them at home. Aung San, who had his men in government offices and was kept so well briefed that on one occasion he complained to Dorman-Smith in his ingenuous way that the secret reports sent in by the police grossly misrepresented him, was not long in ignorance of these transactions and concluded that the Government dared not arrest him. His plan of keeping a rebellion permanently in the offing was working well. In this particular case it had saved him from arrest. As a general principle it would remain profitable. The decisive measure, however, would be a general strike, for which he now continued his preparations, organising the people to resist payment of rents and taxes, and to practise mass disobedience. He also extended his hold inside Government offices and the ranks of the police. Not only were his supporters everywhere in the country, but he had them in the House of Commons, where by questions and the like they tried to induce the Labour Party to change its policy.

Such a state of affairs could not last. It is only surprising that the Labour Government should have continued so long to believe that the White Paper provided a feasible policy. The fact was that, overworked in the crisis of poverty, starvation and bankruptcy which paralysed Europe after the end of the war, they had had little time to devote to Burma. Added to this, the Secretary of State for Burma was also Secretary of State for India. It has not been possible here even to hint at what was happening in India, where a political transition similar to, though more complicated than, Burma's was in progress. To cope with that side of his duties Lord Pethick-Lawrence visited India in March 1946 and, though urgently invited also to pay Burma a call, could not find the opportunity before returning in May to his desk in Whitehall. He had intimated that during his absence from London the Burma Government should not seek to do more than carry on. Mr Attlee, the Prime Minister, would as far as his heavy duties permitted, oversee the Burma Office.

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More and more harassed by the increasing difficulties, Dorman-Smith now changed his mind and resolved to risk urging a new approach on the home Government, though it had so often rebuked him for trying to go too fast and insisted that an election was a first *sine qua non*. On 22 April he wrote to Arthur Henderson, Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Burma, advocating a review of the White Paper policy. So great was the tension, he said, that 'it is very difficult to see how anything short of handing over complete power to a provisional Government could ease it.' But possibly the following would serve: Instead of holding the election to restore the 1935 constitution, hold it to elect a Constituent Assembly, whose task would be to draft a sovereign constitution. The election could be held in the next year, 1947, and the government handed over to the Burmese in 1948. He believed that the League would accept that programme, enter the Council and co-operate in reconstruction. (This proposal was essentially the same as that which the Cabinet made eight months later in January 1947 and which was accepted by the League and solved the Burma problem.) Having advocated this solution, he added wryly: 'The only other method of relieving the tension seems to me to change the Governor.' This suggestion was rather additional than alternative, for he seems to have thought that by standing down he would make it easier for the Cabinet to start afresh. In the sequel, the Cabinet accepted both his solution and his personal self-sacrifice, though without thanking him for either. Indeed, by the time they applied the solution they had forgotten that he had pointed it out and, thinking they had discovered it, took all the credit.

Thus by April 1946 Dorman-Smith had arrived at a position similar to Mountbatten's. From the start both of them had been critical of the White Paper, but Dorman-Smith had had some hope that with the backing of the Moderates it might be acceptable to the Burmese. And, indeed, no one could have been certain before the event that this hope was groundless. After feeling his way for six months Dorman-Smith, by a process of trial and error, was convinced that what he had been asked to do by the Cabinet was an impossibility. Mountbatten could say with truth, 'I told

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you so', but he was in the happier position of an outside critic. His responsibility had been to beat the Japanese. He was not responsible for trying out the White Paper.

Dorman-Smith now entered upon his last month of office. Attlee, as I have said, had begun to give his attention to Burma and he and Dorman-Smith were in direct correspondence. As a newcomer the Premier found it difficult to grasp what exactly was going on. 'It was admittedly not easy to evaluate the various trends of opinion,' he wrote afterwards in his book, *As It Happened*.

U Saw's arrival had increased the difficulty of forming a clear picture. Under instructions from Whitehall, where he was regarded with great distrust, he had not been given a place on the Council. As a result, he was roaming about, trying to ally himself now with Aung San and now with Paw Tun. He wanted to get into power somehow. On 1 May Paw Tun reported that after protracted conversations between U Saw and himself, they had come to an agreement to work together. The news was made more exciting by Paw Tun's further claim that they had together approached Aung San to enter the Council and he had agreed. If this was true, a united democratic front seemed at long last to be in sight, contrary to all expectations. Dorman-Smith immediately wired the intelligence to Attlee, suggesting that the Council be reconstituted, with seats divided amongst the three leaders. A representative delegation could then go to London to discuss a new policy. He himself would like to come back at once for consultation. Attlee replied on 8 May that he found it hard to follow the intricacies of a situation where politicians shifted their position almost daily. Anyhow, it was undesirable to bring in Aung San while the murder charge was outstanding against him. An amnesty was being considered, as military opinion remained opposed to an arrest. But it would be better to wait till that was settled. It was also to be considered that a Council headed by Paw Tun, U Saw and Aung San might not be a united democratic front but a united front against the British. Dorman-Smith, he agreed, should come home for consultation. Perhaps that way they would get things clear.

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On 17 May Dorman-Smith had to wire that U Saw had now quarrelled with Aung San and that things were back as before. This news made Attlee feel that a consultation was all the more necessary. Dorman-Smith should leave for London as soon as Sir Henry Knight, acting Governor of Madras, selected to act for him during his absence, arrived in Rangoon.

On 27 May Dorman-Smith was suddenly struck down with amoebic dysentery. He had been subject to attacks of this disease from time to time. The present attack was a serious one. He was advised by the doctors not to fly back to London, but to go by boat at his leisure. The sea voyage of a month would be the best of treatments. And they strongly urged him not to return to the East.<sup>1</sup> After handing over to Knight on 11 June, he sailed for England with Lady Dorman-Smith on 14 June. But, as he thought he might be coming back, at least for a time, after the consultation, he left most of his belongings behind.

Before his departure he gave Knight some notes on the state of Burma at that moment. These included his final considered opinion of Aung San. 'He is Burma's popular hero and without any shadow of doubt he has the biggest personal following of any man in this country. . . . I look upon him as a very sincere man. . . . His League does possess the only nation-wide organisation. . . . I think he is out for peace and tranquillity. He has enough sense to realise that an up-rising can only mean added misery.' I have quoted these sentences because they show that, besides considering Aung San to be the foremost Burman, he had a high opinion of his character. Coming to terms with this remarkable man had been rendered impossible by the White Paper and this had queered all Dorman-Smith's efforts on Burma's behalf. The Cabinet was, however, on the point of recognising that Aung San's co-operation was so indispensable that it would have to be purchased on his terms. Among the factors which were to convince them was the general strike which he called about a month after Knight had taken over and which paralysed the

<sup>1</sup>Lady Dorman-Smith's diary has against 5 June: 'Dr McRobert has told Reg he should not come back and he has written to this effect to H.M.G.'



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administration, for it included not only labour but the public services, not excepting the police.

Dorman-Smith was at sea from 14 June till 13 July. During that month Attlee did some hard thinking about Burma. Something had to be done at once. It was impossible to wait for Dorman-Smith's return. Mountbatten, whose appointment as Supreme Commander had terminated on 31 May, had arrived in London by air. Attlee sent for him and they discussed the situation. Lord Mountbatten tells me that Attlee began by saying that it would be necessary to appoint a new Governor and that he was looking out for a suitable man. Mountbatten suggested that he should see Major General Rance, whose term as head of the military administration in Burma had ended in January 1946 and who was now in England. He was well acquainted with affairs there and knew Aung San well. The two, indeed, were said to have a mutual regard for each other. Though he was certainly rather far down the list for so high an appointment, the Prime Minister, after seeing him, might think him suitable. Attlee took this advice and sent for Rance. In the conversation which ensued, Rance convinced him that Aung San was the leading personality, without whose co-operation a settlement was impossible. The White Paper had become unworkable and a new policy was required which would bring in Aung San without fail.

On thinking over what Rance had said, Attlee saw that a new policy would mean displacing Paw Tun. 'Throwing over your friends to placate your enemies,' as Pethick-Lawrence had termed it awhile back. Well, it couldn't be helped. After all Paw Tun had had a good run for his money. But he had signally failed to deliver the goods. They had tried to work through him towards a settlement. Now they must see if it could be done through Aung San. Dorman-Smith, as their agent in an unpopular policy, had incurred odium. Besides he could hardly be asked to throw over his old and trusted friends. As it happened, he had already offered to resign. Besides, he was ill and his doctors advised him not to return. His resignation could be attributed to his health. It remained to decide whom to send in his place. Mountbatten favoured Rance. He certainly had many qualifications. Before

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Dorman-Smith landed at Liverpool on 13 July, Attlee had decided to appoint Rance, though he was not gazetted till the 31st.

Dorman-Smith disembarked to find that everything had been settled behind his back. He had been summoned from Rangoon for consultation. By the time he arrived his place had been filled. His reception in Whitehall when he presented himself was chilly and distant. It was left to Pethick-Lawrence to break the news. They had decided on a new start in Burma. He had offered to resign. There was his health, too. He should not go back against medical advice. What did he think? Did his offer hold? Dorman-Smith immediately replied that it did.

That a man who had been Governor of Burma during the five most difficult years of her history should be treated so shabbily may cause surprise. From the first he had had his doubts about the White Paper and in an effort to make it palatable had in his *Cumberland* and Civic Hall speeches given assurances which only brought him cautions from London. The London office had tightened its grip on him and, directing his every move, had constantly reminded him to keep the League at arm's length. In spite of that, he had managed to gain Aung San's confidence to a degree that was quite paradoxical. He continued to the end in his efforts to get him to join the Council. After a struggle of nine months to find a *modus vivendi*, (with his officials, his Council, the Cabinet, the Military, giving him advice from every angle), he had submitted the outline of a proposal which, though no one saw it at the time, was the formula which would solve the problem. How then did it happen that he was hustled out, with no word of appreciation, in so cold a manner, a style so contrary to the usual practice when a retiring Governor is rewarded for his labours with at least a further decoration? The answer would seem to be that the Labour Government, discovering with a shock that the policy they had been pursuing in Burma was heading them for a disaster which would cause them the gravest harm, thought it best to let it be understood that by changing the Governor they had averted the disaster. To have recognised Dorman-Smith's services would have been incompatible with the suggestion that he was to blame.

## CHAPTER XXXI

### *The Epilogue*

Rance left for Burma in August, his instructions being to reach a settlement through Aung San. The national strike of that month had made it yet more imperative to do so; trade was at a standstill and the anarchy in the districts much increased.

After some bargaining, an agreement was reached. The Council was dissolved and Aung San came into a new Council as Deputy President, with the Defence Portfolio.<sup>1</sup> Paw Tun's place as Home Member was taken by Thakin Mya, one of the original Resistance leaders. Tin Tut, who had retired from the Civil Service a little before Dorman-Smith left and joined Aung San, was made Finance Member in place of Htoon Aung Gyaw. Six more appointments were made, mostly from the League, though U Saw was given a place. The Council was granted collective responsibility, which meant that it was united behind Aung San. It was no longer a Council advising a Governor on specific questions put before it, but a Cabinet controlling policy. This arrangement was made without having to alter the legal position. Rance continued, in theory, to govern Burma by virtue of Section 139 of the 1935 Act, but as his power had in practice been transferred to the Council, it was this same Section 139 that gave the Council's transactions their legal validity.

It was about this time that Aung San's colleague, Than Tun, once described as the brains of the League, fell away. He differed from Aung San in political theory, being a Communist of a sort,

<sup>1</sup>The Governor remained President, a *de jure* more than a *de facto* post.

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while Aung San was a Socialist. Rance had convinced Aung San that the Labour Government had changed its policy and was now ready to make a settlement acceptable to the Burmese. But Than Tun, an irreconcilable doctrinaire rather than a statesman, did not believe this. The two parted. The breach liberated Aung San. He had the faculty, which belongs to superior talent, of continuing to learn; his mind expanded as he rose. Though with little knowledge of the outside world and only moderately well educated, he yet made the transition from commander of guerrilla bands to headship of a state without incongruity or much apparent effort. His natural gifts of mind and character sufficed. He was fortunate too in being able to replace Than Tun by Tin Tut, whose first class education, knowledge of the English and of governmental procedures, combined with great ability, made him invaluable at this juncture.

On 8 November the Council published a declaration that arrangements be made without further delay to constitute Burma a sovereign state. On 20 December Attlee announced in the Commons that H.M.G. would receive a delegation from the Council to discuss the steps necessary to create such a state, which, he declared, could remain within or go out of the Commonwealth, as the Burmese desired. By the Statute of Westminster every Dominion had the right of secession. But here was something new; a state which was not yet a Dominion could elect in advance for republican status. Attlee's speech was the first public statement that the White Paper policy had been abandoned. To make sure that Aung San would accept the invitation to come to London, he sent Sir Gilbert Laithwaite, the Permanent Under-Secretary of State, to Burma with instructions to give every assurance that H.M.G. meant exactly what it said. All this differed so much from the way the Labour Government was talking a few months back that the Burmese found it difficult to believe there had been so great a change in so short a time. But Aung San, just as he had believed Rance, now believed Attlee. He accepted the offer of a Council delegation and on 7 January 1947 he, Tin Tut, Thakin Mya and one or two more Councillors left for London by air, to be followed soon afterwards by U Saw.

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His parting advice to the Burmese public was to hope for the best but prepare for the worst.

The talks began on 13 January. The formula adopted was on the lines suggested by Dorman-Smith in his letter of the previous April to Mr Arthur Henderson, M.P. At the election, to be held in the coming April, there would be returned a Constituent Assembly, not the Legislature of the White Paper. The duty of the Constituent Assembly would be to draw up a constitution for the whole of Burma, including the hill territories. During the interval before the new state came into being (about a year was anticipated) the Council would be the Provisional or Interim Government and would be treated as a Dominion Government, competent to discuss all matters of policy and administration and to decide upon them. An agreement on these lines was reached and on 27 January signed by Attlee and Aung San, though U Saw dissented. Thus Aung San won what he had set out to win.

Tin Tut sent me a message to come next day to the Dorchester, where they were all staying. After tea with him I was taken to an adjoining room and introduced to Aung San. He did not look like a man in a moment of triumph, the leader who, succeeding where so many had failed, had the day before regained for his country the sovereignty which it had lost in 1885. His manner was shy though blunt, retiring though severe. Some kind of inner excitement possessed him. When he spoke, it was in wonderment at his success, though, as he reminded me, it remained for him to convince the Burmese people on his return that the paper he had signed did truly represent their liberation.

Tin Tut invited me to stay on for an informal dinner, which was served in Aung San's suite. The members of the delegation were all there except U Saw, whose memorandum of dissent was seen as a manoeuvre to confuse opinion in Burma and wreck a settlement through Aung San. He was condemned for subordinating the national interest to his personal ambition. It was also said that he had been prompted by revenge for the loss of an eye when he was shot at, as he believed or alleged, by Aung San's partisans four months before.

During dinner I asked Aung San whether the Burmese would

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elect to remain in the Commonwealth or not. He replied that he personally could see advantages in remaining, but that the people might declare the other way. They did not think of Britain as a mother country, as the Dominions did; and the Japanese invasion had proved that being part of the British Empire was no guarantee of safety. Indeed, had they been an independent state they would have suffered much less. The Siamese, for instance, had got through with little damage. But it would be for the Constituent Assembly to decide the matter.

Lord Mountbatten tells me that, when Aung San called on him in London at this time, he asked him the same question and that Aung San replied that had it not been for the capital charge which the Government had sought to bring against him, he would have been more inclined to press his supporters to accept Dominion Status. As it was, their resentment was such that it would be useless for him to attempt to induce them. It is to be noted, however, that the documents and other authorities cited in this book indicate that the League's aim was always a republic. Lord Mountbatten's suggestion here is that the League, despite its public pronouncements in favour of republican status, would have elected to remain in the Commonwealth had it been handled with more finesse from the start. This may well be true. It should not have been beyond the resources of our diplomats to keep the Burmese inside the Commonwealth. But the fact was that our representative was told to negotiate terms which no finesse on earth could have made acceptable. Had the Cabinet decided that on our return to Burma an offer of Dominion status was to be made straight away, the deal might have been brought off. But the reader of this book will have perceived the many reasons why the offer was not made at once. It never occurred to the Commons that such was the minimum offer. Nor is that surprising. The idea was too new. England was not ready for it. When twelve months later it did occur to the Commons, the opportunity had been lost.

On 29 January Aung San gave a reception in the Dorchester to the Diplomatic Corps and Members of Parliament. It was interesting to observe how this young man, who had never been to England before and whose experience hardly extended beyond

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the usages of Burmese society, much less cosmopolitan than now, received his guests, as they were announced, with pleasant assurance. The night was very cold; the fountain outside the Dorchester was frozen; the central heating had broken down; the electric fires scattered about the big reception room hardly took the chill off the air; yet the party went well. Aung San, a neat little figure in his Major General's uniform, was eyed with some curiosity by the foreign diplomats, who found it an experience to meet an Asiatic who had wrested his country two days before from the grip of an old colonial power. They called him Your Excellency. It was noteworthy how he outshone the other Burmese present. His habitual reserve had thawed; he was genial and gay. It was as if he were conscious for the first time that he was not only a national hero but an international celebrity. Tin Tut, who was inclined to shepherd him, now showed him off with respectful pride.

The Delegation returned to Burma next day. On 3 February the London agreement was ratified by resolutions in the Council and the League. On 19 February, at a conference of the older politicians, which included Paw Tun, U Saw and Ba Maw, Aung San was accused of parleying with the Imperialists and betraying his country. This seems to have been a last attempt of his political enemies to displace him by trying to mislead the more ignorant classes of the population. It failed. Even the most ignorant could not believe that three weeks in London had turned Aung San into an Anglophil. U Saw now resigned from the Council. Perhaps he was already planning the stroke which would more surely rid him of his rival.

Since it was of the utmost importance to hear from the hill peoples whether they would agree to join the new sovereign state of Burma, a conference was convened in the course of February at Panglong in the Shan States. H.M.G. sent two representatives, Lord Listowel and Mr Arthur Bottomley, M.P. There had been a tendency hitherto to over-emphasise the backwardness of the hill peoples and their fear of the Burmese. They were not as backward and needful of paternal care as their British administrators had liked to think; their military successes against the Japanese

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had given them a new martial self-confidence. In fact, they were well able to look after themselves. When at Panglong it was suggested that they should come in as self-administered units into the Union of Burma, a solution which Aung San had accepted, they agreed to do so, except the Karens who demanded a separate Karen state within the British Empire, an irrational demand, as half of them were scattered about among the villages of Lower Burma.

On 7 April the election was held. Had it resulted in the defeat of the League's candidates, it would not necessarily have caused the downfall of the Aung San Council, since it was being held to set up a Constituent Assembly, not a Government. Nevertheless, the League's defeat would have jeopardised the London agreement. The issue, however, was so little in doubt that U Saw and Ba Maw, seeing they had no chance, boycotted the election. The Karens also abstained. The League received a unanimous vote of confidence, all its hundred candidates being returned. The old question whether it represented the people was thus finally answered in the affirmative. Complaints that the League had exercised undue pressure through its organisation were made, but do not seem to have resulted in the disqualification of any elected candidates by the tribunals.

On 10 June the Constituent Assembly met and elected Thakin Nu its President. This was his first appointment since the overthrow of the Ba Maw Government in which, as we have seen, he was a Minister. On the second day of the session a resolution was passed declaring for independence outside the Commonwealth.<sup>1</sup> An outline of the new constitution, drawn up by a League committee presided over by Aung San, was now presented, and the

<sup>1</sup>To the reasons already given why the Burmese desired to leave the Commonwealth, should be added the fact that they believed at this time that India was leaving. When later this did not happen, the Burmese leaders received a shock, Sir Hubert Rance has told me. But by then it was hardly possible for them to go back. Sir Hubert added: 'U Nu prior to his departure for the United Kingdom just before the hand-over informed me that he had lain awake all the previous night thinking out a formula which would both keep Burma within the Commonwealth and maintain his honour.' Evidently he concluded that it could not be done.



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Assembly appointed sub-committees to examine it and begin the drafting of a full text. On 23 June a Mission headed by Thakin Nu left for London to report that Burma was leaving the Commonwealth and to discuss the details of the coming transfer of power. It was arranged that Tin Tut should become at once High Commissioner in England.

The Mission returned early in July. All was going smoothly. The Constituent Assembly was hard at work. The Council was busy with reconstruction projects. Though armed bands continued to make the country districts unsafe, ploughing had begun and a larger crop was expected. Politically the country was calmer than it had been for years.

The Council had its chamber in one of the principal rooms of the Secretariat, formerly the seat of British power. There on the morning of 19 July it was sitting with Aung San in the chair. Some minutes after 10.30 a.m. a party of Burmese gunmen armed with automatics passed through the archway into the courtyard and entered the Council chamber. Their approach was so swift, sudden and unexpected that they were not challenged by the police. Without any parley they opened fire on the Councillors at point blank range and in a few seconds Aung San and four of his colleagues lay dead. Two others, badly wounded, died in hospital shortly afterwards. The assassins escaped, firing as they went and killing one of a minister's bodyguard. But they were followed up and arrested at U Saw's house. He also was arrested, as they were his men, and was charged with instigating the murders. His trial before a special tribunal presided over by a Burmese High Court Judge lasted thirty-seven days. Seventy-eight witnesses for the prosecution and thirty-one for the defence were examined. U Saw was found guilty of murder and hanged.

The assassination of Aung San, though a cruel blow, which caused the utmost grief, did not interrupt the work of completing the liberation of the country. Rance immediately sent for Thakin Nu, by common repute Aung San's ablest colleague, and offered him the leadership of the Interim Government, a post which he accepted. In this book we first met him as a political prisoner in

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Mandalay Jail. Then we saw him take office under Ba Maw to cover his connection with the Resistance. We have also heard of him as a writer. His *Burma under the Japanese*, the best of all the works written on this period, has the quality of a work of art. Even quieter and more diffident than Aung San and equally without personal ambition, he took up the mantle of his fallen chief, resolved to finish what remained to be finished. The main part of this was to complete the draft of the constitution and give it legal force by treaty with the British Government. By September the draft was ready. Thakin Nu again journeyed to London and on 17 October a treaty between Britain and Burma was signed, whose first clause was: 'The Government of the United Kingdom recognises the Republic of the Union of Burma as a fully Independent State.' The actual transfer took place in Rangoon at 4.20 a.m. on 4 January, 1948, a time considered auspicious by the astrologers. The Governor, Sir Hubert Rance, had a great send-off. The British and the Burmese parted friends.

So ended the rule of the British in Burma, in the hundred and twenty-third year after they had annexed her maritime provinces of Arakan and Tenasserim, and in the sixty-third year after taking Mandalay, her capital, and banishing Thibaw, her King. It is usual to claim on behalf of the British occupation that it greatly benefitted Burma. But it can be argued that the Burmese did not learn anything from us which they could not have learned had they been lucky enough to remain independent. By the nineteenth century the modern world was on their borders. They would have modernised themselves in any case at this juncture, as did their neighbours, the Siamese, a people no more advanced in 1885 than the Burmese, yet who under their own dynasty progressed as quickly as did Burma under the supposed advantage of a western dynasty.

Our claim, that we did Burma a good turn by conquering her, eases our conscience today. But at the time of the conquest we made no pretence to such a motive. European nations had for centuries been bringing countries in Asia under their dominion. It was considered a glorious thing to do. We were sure that the British Empire was a great and splendid achievement. Such views

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were part of what made us what we are. They must be accepted in their historical context. To blame ourselves for the conquest of Burma would involve us in a condemnation of a great part of our ventures overseas. We must accept it as an historical fact, a normal event for its time and place.

But we must also accept as an historical fact our change of view in the twentieth century, when we began to doubt whether empire building was as noble an occupation as we had conceived. How this doubt was born and grew; whether Germany's attempt, so nearly successful, to reduce us, made us more sensitive about those we had reduced; and how far tiredness, disillusion, poverty, failing strength, contributed to give us pause, are questions which future historians will examine. Suffice it to say that by the nineteen-twenties a great change was coming over our outlook.

Had this not happened Burma could not have recovered her liberty. This is not to say that Aung San was any the less his nation's hero. His coming, however, was a symptom of the age. He was produced in part by the very factors which caused us to change our views and could not have been successful had those same factors not prepared the way for him. But so it is always in the careers of great men. They appear when the moment is ripe. The British were all set to grant Burma her liberation. They had their plan how this should come about, and wanted the satisfaction of carrying it out themselves. The role of liberator was in the air; there was rivalry for it. Dorman-Smith planned for years in the hope of filling it. Mountbatten was not indifferent to its attractions. Attlee and the Labour Government recognised that it would suit them to perfection. On the Burmese side there were many competitors, Paw Tun for one and U Saw for another. Yet the historical process which produced all these would-be liberators had its central figure in Aung San.

## *Dates of Principal Events*

1941

- 4 May Dorman-Smith sworn in as Governor of Burma.
- early Oct U Saw leaves for London to see Churchill.
- late Oct Wavell's first visit to Burma.
- 7 Dec Pearl Harbour. Outbreak of war with Japan.
- 15 Dec Burma command transferred to C.-in-C. India.  
Victoria Point taken by Japanese.
- 21 Dec Wavell arrives Rangoon.
- 22 Dec Wavell flies to Chungking to meet Chiang Kai-Shek.  
General Pownall flies to Singapore to relieve Air  
Marshal Sir Robert Brooke-Popham.
- 23 Dec First bombing of Rangoon. Flight of Indian labour.
- 25 Dec Wavell at Moulmein. Second bombing of Rangoon.
- 27 Dec Major General Hutton becomes G.O.C. Burma.
- 29 Dec Wavell made Supreme Commander, South-West Pacific  
Command, headquarters Java. Burma not left with  
succeeding C.-in-C. India, but remains under Wavell  
as Supreme Commander.

1942

- 1 Jan Air Vice-Marshal D. F. Stevenson takes over command  
of R.A.F. in Burma from Group Captain Manning.
- 14 Jan Renewed flight of Rangoon labour. Japanese cross by  
pass east of Tavoy.
- 19 Jan Japanese take Tavoy. Aung San and the Thirty ac-  
company them.
- 20 Jan News of U Saw's arrest at Haifa reaches Burma. 46  
Indian Brigade arrives Rangoon.

### *Dates of Principal Events*

- 22 Jan Evacuation of Mergui. News received that a Japanese division was on the Kawkareik pass. Dorman-Smith wires Amery to know if 18 British Division coming or not. Rout of 16 Indian Brigade at Kawkareik pass.
- 25 Jan Wavell flies from Java to Rangoon.
- 30 Jan Japanese attack Moulmein.
- 31 Jan 2 Burma Brigade evacuates Moulmein, 48 Indian Brigade arrives Rangoon.
- 2-3 Feb Hutton visits Chiang Kai-Shek at Lashio.
- 5 Feb Wavell again flies from Java to Rangoon. At Moulmein next day.
- 15 Feb Japanese take Singapore.
- 19 Feb Outflanked on the Bilin river, Smyth is ordered to fall back on the Sittang.
- 20 Feb E signal given in Rangoon. Churchill asks Mr Curtin for the Australian division.
- 21 Feb Arrival of Armoured Brigade.
- 23 Feb The disaster at the Sittang bridge.
- 25 Feb News received in Rangoon that the Australian division not coming.
- 27 Feb Wavell becomes again C.-in-C. India.
- 1 Mar 5th Chinese Army begins to move from China to Burma. Dorman-Smith leaves Rangoon. Wavell arrives Magwe and postpones evacuation of Rangoon.
- 2 Mar Dorman-Smith reaches Maymyo.
- 4 Mar Wavell meets Alexander at Calcutta. Alexander flies to Magwe.
- 5 Mar Alexander in Rangoon. Takes over command of the army from Hutton, who becomes his Chief of Staff.
- 63 Indian Brigade arrives.
- 7 Mar Evacuation of Rangoon. The Taukkyan road block.
- 11 Mar General Stilwell arrives in Maymyo to meet Alexander.
- 19 Mar Lt. General Slim assumes command of 1 Burcorps.
- 21 Mar Destruction of R.A.F. at Magwe. Dorman-Smith begins tour of Shan States.
- 22 Mar 1 Burma Division moves from Toungoo to the Irrawaddy on relief by 5th Chinese Army.

### *Dates of Principal Events*

- 24 Mar Japanese attack Chinese on Toungoo front and defeat them.
- 25 Mar Dorman-Smith returns to Maymyo via Meiktila.
- 31 Mar Wavell flies to Maymyo.
- 1 Apr Alexander withdraws from Prome and retreats northwards towards oilfields at Yenangyaung. Wavell and Alexander plan that, if impossible to hold oilfields, effort be made to hold Upper Burma. The arrangement would be for 1 Burma Division to cover Tamu road and 17 Division to keep with 5th Chinese Army and fall back to Myitkyina.
- 3 Apr Mandalay destroyed by Japanese airforce.
- 5 Apr The British army stands at Migyaung-ye on Irrawaddy, covering oilfields.
- 6 Apr Chiang Kai-Shek and Madame visit Maymyo, British army and civil headquarters. Dorman-Smith visits Mandalay.
- 15 Apr Yenangyaung oilfields blown up.
- 18/19 Apr Battle on the Pinchaung. Army retreats northwards.
- 20 Apr Japanese outflanking movement through Shan States begins.
- 25 Apr Owing to collapse of 5th Chinese Army and to Japanese advance through Shan States, Alexander cancels plan made on 1 April to send 17 Division to Myitkyina and orders army to cross Irrawaddy towards Shwebo, to be ready to leave for India by Tamu pass. Dorman-Smith leaves Maymyo.
- 28 Apr Dorman-Smith reaches Myitkyina.
- 30 Apr Alexander at Shwebo gives order for withdrawal of the army to India.
- 2 May Dorman-Smith hears of above and asks Secretary of State for orders.
- 4 May Dorman-Smith flies to India.
- 20 May The retreat over the Tamu pass completed.
- 11 June Dorman-Smith goes to London for consultation.
- June American naval victories in the Pacific of the Coral Sea and Midway.

### *Dates of Principal Events*

- 1 Aug U Ba Maw appointed Ahnashin or Head of the Executive by the Japanese.
- end Aug Dorman-Smith returns to India and makes Simla the headquarters of the Burma Government.
- Nov American victories at Guadalcanal in New Guinea. Tet-Hpongyi Thein Pe, as agent of the Resistance, goes to India.

#### 1943

- 15 Feb Burma hill tracts, not conquered by Japanese, placed under C.-in-C. India (Wavell)'s *de facto* command, though remaining *de jure* under Burma Governor.
- Mar-Apr British invade Arakan without success.
- June Wavell becomes Viceroy of India, Auchinleck C.-in-C. India.
- 1 Aug U Ba Maw made Adipati, Head of State, by Japanese. Aung San becomes his Minister of Defence.
- end Aug Dorman-Smith's second visit to London for consultation.
- 16 Nov Admiral Lord Mountbatten takes over charge in Delhi as Supreme Commander, South-East Asia. Lt. General Sir William Slim takes over command in chief of Fourteenth Army.

#### 1944

- 1 Jan Mountbatten given charge *de facto* and *de jure* of unconquered portion of hill Burma.
- 15 Mar Japanese offensive begins. Invasion of India.
- Apr Mountbatten moves his headquarters from Delhi to Kandy, Ceylon.
- 7 May Stilwell takes Myitkyina airfield, after advancing through the Hukawng. Town not taken till August.
- June Japanese invasion of India fails.
- 1 Aug Foundation of A.F.P.F. League. Major General Aung San announces his intention to lead Burma National Army in a revolt against Japanese. Underground

### *Dates of Principal Events*

Provisional Government set up. Stilwell officiates at Kandy as Supreme Commander during Mountbatten's absence in London.

Oct British re-invasion of Burma begins. Dorman-Smith visits Mountbatten at Kandy.

19 Oct Stilwell recalled by Roosevelt.

12 Dec Debate in House of Commons on the de Chair blue print.

late Dec Intelligence in direct touch with headquarters of the Resistance.

#### 1945

21 Mar Mandalay retaken by British.

27 Mar Aung San and the Burma Defence Army rise in revolt against Japanese.

Apr/May Dorman-Smith again in London for consultation.

2 May Rangoon retaken by British.

7 May The Germans surrender. End of war in West.

16 May First meeting of Slim and Aung San.

17 May Publication of Government White Paper on Burma.

20 June Dorman-Smith's speech on *Cumberland*, explaining the White Paper.

Jul/Aug General election in England. Labour party returned. Pethick-Lawrence succeeds Amery as Secretary of State for Burma.

8 Aug First atom bomb dropped.

12 Aug Japan surrenders.

early Sept Aung San is summoned to Kandy by Mountbatten.

16 Oct Return of Dorman-Smith and his Government to Burma.

#### 1946

27 Mar The meeting at Government House to consider arrest of Aung San.

22 Apr Dorman-Smith's letter to Arthur Henderson, M.P.

14 Jun Dorman-Smith leaves Burma.

13 Jul He arrives in England.

31 Jul Rance appointed Governor of Burma.



## *Dates of Principal Events*

1947

- Jan A delegation from the Burma Council led by Aung San comes to an agreement in London with the Cabinet.
- Feb The Panglong conference with the hill peoples.
- 7 Apr Election held for Constituent Assembly.
- 10 Jun Constituent Assembly declares for a Republic.
- 19 Jul Assassination of Aung San. U Nu appointed in his place.
- 17 Oct Treaty signed with H.M.G. whereby Burma recognised as an independent sovereign state.

1948

- 4 Jan The Republic is inaugurated.

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